

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media

Issue 47

Summer 2005

Source: ejumpcut.org

Jump Cut was founded as a print publication by John Hess, Chuck Kleinhans, and Julia Lesage in Bloomington, Indiana, and published its first issue in 1974. It was conceived as an alternative publication of media criticism—emphasizing left, feminist, and LGBTQ perspectives. It evolved into an online publication in 2001, bringing all its back issues with it.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Mindful violence: the visibility of power and inner life in *Kill Bill*

by Aaron Anderson



In *Greystoke: the Legend of Tarzan Lord of the Apes*, Tarzan's power derives from his in-between status. He's not fully ape nor fully man. Here Tarzan / Christopher Lambert visually displays his power by killing a jaguar, an ape killer.



A key moment of character transformation narrated through violent imagery shows Tarzan becoming "Lord of the Apes" by killing his rival. Tarzan can only do this by using power - a knife - taken from the "other"

Much has been written about Quentin Tarantino's familiarity with foreign action films. In fact, Tarantino's love of low-budget action films and the violent imagery in them has become one of the more significant parts of his public personae as a director. For this reason, almost every review of Tarantino's latest works, *Kill Bill: Volume(s) 1 and 2*, notes something about the long list of films from which he borrows, and numerous fan web-sites devote space to sometimes lengthy arguments over his exact inspirations for any given scene. Most of what has been written in this regard suggests that there is something unique—or at least personal—in Tarantino's allegiance to violent imagery from pop culture. However, I argue that Tarantino's deliberate use of borrowed imagery from Asian martial arts films is far from unique. And while this may surprise no one, the reason that I propose this might surprise many. I suggest that violent imagery—especially that connected to Asian martial arts—functions as one of the primary cinematic languages for character description and plot progression in modern action films.

I have an unique perspective on the subject of media violence because for part of my living I choreograph fights. Most of my recent work has been on stage rather than on film (because the other part of my living is as an assistant professor in a city where film work is scarce), but many of my close friends get consistent film work. You would have seen their work in *Alien Resurrection* (1997), *Titus* (1999), *Secondhand Lions* (2003), *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *The Two Towers* (2002), *The Return of the King* (2003), and *Troy* (2004) to name a few of the more visible recent examples. I deliberately use the word "friends" here instead of "colleagues" because the world of the professional fight

world of men



In *Dances With Wolves*, Lt. Dunbar / Kevin Costner exercises power by shooting a stampeding buffalo. This visual narrative moment fundamentally transforms the character, as only then does the Sioux tribe fully accept him.



Like Tarzan's, Dunbar's power derives from his in-between status. Here, Dunbar saves the Sioux from a Pawnee raid by supplying "white men's" weapons. Dunbar's position as the tribe's physical protector is described as "a great honor." He gains further visual coding as powerful by using the guns.

director is very small, and many of us know each other socially as well as professionally. I mention any of this because it is the very smallness of this professional world that prompts me to write much of what follows. (In fact, there is not even a uniform title for the role of fight director. We may be called fight coordinator, stunt coordinator, movement choreographer, etc., depending on the specific parameters of the job.)

We fight directors take a number of things about our business for granted that directly impact film scholarship. For instance, one of the basic maxims of our business is that every film fight necessarily tells a story and is therefore—by definition—always more than mere spectacle or an excuse to display actors' bodies. This stands in stark contrast to most theoretical writing on the subject, much of which remain tied to the old Aristotelian hierarchy that values plot over character, and character over spectacle. From my perspective as a fight director, none of these Aristotelian elements can be wholly separated from the others, let alone separated into hierarchical order. Furthermore, debates about media violence often slip into hyperbole. Many such debates therefore tend toward one of two extremes. Either they denigrate any displays of violence as simply "mindless" or "gratuitous," or they celebrate the "spectacle" of violent excess without acknowledging the possibility of any social impact at all. I am going to attempt something of a middle road between these two extremes by explaining some of the ways that violent imagery conveys messages to a viewing audience. In other words, by showing that media violence is almost never "mindless," I also hope to shed a little light on some of the reasons why the social impact of the images may be so pervasive.

Violence, Asia and the visible inner journey

Many action films use violence as a central metaphor. To be sure, a large part of the appeal of these films is the visceral spectacle of that violence. Yet, what is not often noted in studies of action films is that one of the most common genre themes presents an inner journey resulting in some sort of fundamental character transformation. In these character-driven action stories, violence plays a much more complex role than simple spectacle. The main difficulty in telling the story of an inner journey on film is, of course, that inner journeys are hard to see. However, visual languages, like other languages, work through systems of differentiation. So



In *Dances with Wolves* (extended director's cut), a "helpless" woman visibly displays an inner strength by smashing the head of a rival Pawnee warrior.



The Last Samurai's Captain Algren / Tom Cruise changes when he accepts the samurai code of *bushido*. Here he fights to a draw against the village's most skilled swordfighter. The fight visually reveals Algren's new awareness that the only way to win is to cease worrying about either losing or dying - a central tenant of *bushido*.



one way to overcome this difficulty is to show the character in differing physical environments as the inner journey progresses. The more extreme the visual differentiation between outer worlds, the more extreme the inner transformation may seem to become. In this way, Asia and other "exotic" locations often figure prominently in tales of Westerners' transformations. For instance (to name only a very few examples), *Greystoke: the Legend of Tarzan Lord of the Apes* (1984), uses the jungles of Africa as a visual metaphor for "far from Western civilization." *Dances with Wolves* (1990) does the same with the expanses of the American plains. And *The Last Samurai* (2004) contrasts Western civilization to that of neo-feudal Japan (in fact, the need for contrast largely explains why the leading character's transformation takes place far from even Meiji society: which was inherently modernized—i.e. Westernized). Western film stories about inner journeys may use exotic locations *primarily* to establish external visual marker of internal character change.

Related to this need for visual markers, films also use what religious scholar Joseph Campbell termed "the hero's journey" as part of many scripts, and so delineate the whole story structure around a combination of inner, spiritual, and outer journeying.^[1] Although Campbell was concerned with outlining similarities between diverse religions and mythologies, his analysis of the narrative structure of heroic tales is applicable to film studies as well. Campbell outlined three basic stages in all heroic tales:

- the hero is separated from his or her "normal" life
- the hero is initiated into a new way of life
- the hero returns to his or her original world with some form of power learned in the other world.^[2]

Besides their reliance on exotic location to demarcate the boundaries of this inner journey, films such as *Greystoke*, *Dances With Wolves* and *The Last Samurai* have another very important similarity. The power gained or exercised in these exotic worlds is almost always of a fundamentally violent nature. For instance, in *Greystoke*, Tarzan's ability to effect change in either world (animal or civilized) derives mainly from his sheer physical strength and bestial fighting skills. Likewise, in *Dances with Wolves*, the protagonist, Lieutenant Dunbar (Kevin Costner), becomes fully accepted into the Sioux tribe only after killing a stampeding buffalo (Dunbar does this to save the life of a younger hunter), and later the script reinforces this acceptance by also having Dunbar supply rifles to

Algren is seen as having fully become a samurai by this visual shortcut. He's dressed in feudal Japanese armor and given a sword of his own. Since similar imagery exists in diverse media, it can be used as shorthand for a wealth of character information (and is also seen throughout *Kill Bill*). Algren's reverence toward the blade indicates not only physical strength but also inner calm.



No uniform credit listing indicates fight director. In *Kill Bill 1*'s opening credits, Yuen Wo-ping has this image saying he was "Martial Arts Advisor." Such prominent credit placement is uncommon in Western action films. Here it shows how *fighting* is used to market both films.



Crouching Tiger, Hidden

quell a war-party raid by the rival Pawnee tribe. And *The Last Samurai*'s protagonist, Captain Algren (Tom Cruise), is only able to find inner peace through dedicated study of the warrior's disciplined code of *bushido* (sets of "rules" which were said to govern a samurai's approach to life and death). In this case, Algren's transformation through the samurai warrior ethos is the basis of the entire film, so much so that the kanji characters that appeared on the posters for the film did not say "The Last Samurai," they said "*Bushido*."

I suggest that the main reason violence becomes so important to telling these types of inner journeys on film is that acts of violence make the idea of personal power itself visible. In other words, a character that wins a fight is automatically marked as "powerful," while a character that loses a fight is likewise marked as "powerless" or at least as less powerful than the winner. Asian martial arts combine both of these ideas together into convenient shorthand—as a visual marker both of change and of power.

Here let me pause for a moment to highlight the significance of visual shorthand for understanding violence in films. You see, one of the reasons that fight directing can even exist as a profession is that every choreographed fight is necessarily narrative. There is always a story implicit in the way a cinematic or theatrical fight's events unfold. This is true even of highly stylized fights or of choreography that is just plain "bad." The very nature of combat implies a negotiation between two or more competing interests. Thus it is virtually impossible to choreograph a fight that does not in some way identify something about the relative power of these competing identities. In fact, the primary role of a fight director is to create movement that is *legible* in this narrative sense. That is, fight movements need to clearly communicate the story of this negotiation. However, few people outside of our profession know how to "read" movement (especially intricate combat tactics or foreign or outdated military maneuvers). So one of the primary tricks of our trade is that we borrow (we more often use the term "steal") recognizable movements or iconography from other sources.

We do this for three main reasons:

1) Inspiration:

No one becomes a fight director without some personal interest in violent stories; accordingly, most of us are all also fans of the subject and so whenever we see something

Dragon brought Wo-ping's signature wire-work to prominence in the West. Although many critics discussed this fight in the bamboo forest, none of them labeled this fight "violent." Most simply noted its visual beauty and the subtlety of the character interaction.



In the script of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* this sword has almost magical properties. Here, a shot emphasizing the heroine's touch helps communicate to viewers the blade's tactile quality. Similar reverence lends an almost palpable sensation to the narrative use of swords in many action films, including those in *The Last Samurai* and both *Kill Bill* films.



Bill's entrance early in *Volume 2* plays with the

that piques our own imagination we tend to want to riff on a similar theme. Also, it is the nature of the creative process itself that art tends to beget other art. In fact, it is much more difficult to invent an original concept than it is to play with variety within familiar themes. For that reason too, we often look for inspiration in a wide variety of other media such as theatre, graphic novels, visual art, sculpture, music—anything that might spark our imagination.

2) Economics:

Film fights are almost entirely a consumer-driven product. That is, people don't watch film fights because we make them, rather quite the opposite is true, we make them because people will potentially pay good money to see them.[3] As such, certain styles or themes become "hot" from time to time. So we tend to build fights that reflect what we think those trends to be (in film, of course, such themes are also chosen in close consultation with the rest of the production staff). [4]

3) The nature of movement itself as a language:

One of the primary ways that most people "read" movement is through association with other known movement patterns. For example, one of the top theatrical fight directors often explains this by noting that it would be very difficult successfully to mime building a snowman to an audience that had never before seen snow. One of the main priorities for anyone choreographing narrative movement is therefore to ensure the recognizability of the movements.[5] "Borrowing" movement from successful films is thus also a way to guarantee some degree of audience familiarity.

Not coincidentally, these professional realities parallel some of what has been written about the ways that film communicates to an audience. For instance, in "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner" [sic], Robert Warshow suggests that violence (or at least the presence of guns) lies at the "emotional center" of both gangster films and westerns. The way a particular character approaches violence in these genres tells us something about the inner ethical values of that character (654). As Warshow puts it:

"The gangster's pre-eminence lies in the suggestion that he may at any moment lose control; his strength is not in being able to shoot faster or straighter than others, but in being more willing to shoot. 'Do it first,' says *Scarface* expounding his mode of operation, 'and keep doing it!' With the Westerner [sic], it

audience's knowledge of other martial arts films. Connoisseurs may see Bill as both the character Bill and as David Carradine the actor who played Caine in *Kung Fu*. Here he plays the same flute that he played in the television series.



A connoisseur twist comes from having Gordon Liu play Pai Mei, a character he fought in many of his early films. The subtitled phrase, “Your so-called kung fu is really quite pathetic,” refers to an almost comical reason to fight that was common in many 1970s Hong Kong action films.



The first image in *Kill Bill* is of a bloody Bride, Beatrix Kiddo, about to be shot in the head. It establishes violence as the story's underlying ethos. At the same time, the almost tender way in which Bill wipes blood from Kiddo's

is a crucial point of honor NOT to ‘do it first’: his gun remains in its holster until the moment of combat.” (657)

Warshaw also suggests that fans of both genres are basically “connoisseurs” who “[derive] pleasure from the appreciation of minor variations within the working out of a pre-established order” (662). These statements mirror two other basic facts of my business:

- Most fights retell essentially the same basic story. Minor variation is necessary to differentiate one product from another in the marketplace. However, major variation rarely works if it travels too far from an already familiar movement language.
- There are almost always larger ethical dimensions within these stories. As Warshaw notes: “The conflict of good and bad [becomes reduced to] a duel between two men” (662).

There are thus at least two points that are important to consider when analyzing the use of violence in films such as *Kill Bill*:

- Many films rely on variation within familiar visual codes to convey information to an audience.
- Violent imagery always contains some type of inner or ethical content.

Although this second point runs counter to many people's beliefs about violence, it is nevertheless fundamental to understanding how violent stories convey information to a viewing audience. Any personal action—violent or not—necessarily involves a wide array of inner thoughts, both conscious and unconscious. Actions that affect other people—as violence does—therefore constitute a type of pragmatic ethics in which inner views about how one actually interacts with the world become outwardly embodied. Embodiment of such inner belief is also the basis of what we call “character.”

This is as true in modern politics as it is in a film's digesis. We know a person's character primarily by their actions, or at least by what we perceive to be their potential actions in moments of crisis. Associated with this is the belief that emotional crisis often inhibits higher cognitive function. “Character” thus also comes to mean the core of a person's being, or the way that they would act if unimpeded by social restriction (this is why politician's personal lives are often used to justify or argue against their ability to hold public office).

face reveals a narrative play already at work within this depiction of violence.



A recurring theme in both films is “epic” combat in mundane settings. Here *The Bride* / Beatrix Kiddo battles Vernita Green with common household items such as kitchen knives and frying pans.



The fight's pivotal moment occurs when Green's daughter Nikki arrives home from school. The visual composition sets in contrast assassin vs. mother, violence vs. domesticity.



Coupled with this is the fact that in dramatic stories, many interactions with the world come at moments of such emotional crisis. This is what drama is. So, when we talk about character revelations in a film—or moments that define a character—what we are actually talking about, in part, is exposure of this inner philosophy. Violence—martial arts in particular—plays into the exposure of this inner character in a number of ways.

As many social critics have pointed out, violence suggests a rather simplistic definition of personal power—as an ability to harm others. Yet this same simplicity also makes physical violence an excellent cinematic narrative marker of power for two primary reasons: first, force is indeed one of the most basic forms of control, so audiences therefore understand what the movement is meant to signify. Second and even more importantly for film, physical violence—and the potential power it signifies—can easily be visually represented. For example, suppose for a moment that you are a filmmaker and that you need to demonstrate to your audience something about the inner life of one of the characters in your film. Now while there are probably literally hundreds of ways that you might approach this, let us go further and suppose that the character moment you want to display needs to say something about the inner strength of the character — what is often termed “heart” or “will” in sports narratives.

Let us go even further yet and suppose that this moment you need to present comes at a pivotal place in the script. The solution you come up with must be both clear and viscerally gripping. What you will find, if you are a director who has even moderate experience with other films, is that one of the most tried and true solutions to this problem is to include an act of physical violence. This solution also has the added benefit of being cheaper to produce than many of the other solutions you might envision. While this kind of decision making is common for artistic directors of all genres (e.g., using moments when a protagonist stands up to a bully or otherwise overcomes an exterior force come especially to mind), marketing a film as an “action” or “adventure” story also means that the work promises to provide the very type of visceral thrills that this physical confrontation accomplishes so well.

For these reasons, if you are directing an action film, physical violence might easily become one of your primary “go to” scenes or modes of character expression. For critics it might therefore be tempting to evaluate scenes of physical violence only in terms of this visceral response

Kiddo tacitly agrees not only to stop fighting but also to hide the world of violence from her opponent's child. This act marks her as an honorable character. Likewise, her ability to "turn off" her desire for revenge marks her ability to do violence as a disciplined, professional skill. Both traits aid audience empathy.



Kiddo's relative kindness toward Nikki - seen here witnessing the death of her mother - is immediately followed by a quote from the *bushido* code warning against compassion. This juxtaposition suggests that Kiddo will eventually pay a price for her "honorable" act. In fact, Tarantino already plans a sequel in which Nikki seeks revenge.



One of *Kill Bill 2*'s central themes is to contrast an

(and in fact many film critics deride action films as nothing more than part of a low-culture "body" genre for exactly this reason). However, such a critical response overlooks and elides the very problem with which we — hypothetically — began: the need to visually display something about the inner life of a character.

In the strictest sense, martial arts are simply military tactics on a personal level. Like military tactics, which must often account for political as well as military necessity, martial arts can be seen as having two fundamentally interrelated functions: 1) specific techniques (for either offense or defense) and 2) beliefs about the proper use of those techniques. In other words, what might be called "philosophy" as well as physical practice defines many martial arts. This is especially true of martial arts that developed in conjunction with religious beliefs. Since they view the world as intrinsically interrelated, holistic religions particularly influence the philosophy and thus the practice of many martial arts. This is principally an aspect of "Eastern" religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism.[6] Martial arts that have developed in regions where these philosophies are widely practiced therefore often include philosophical elements as part of their defining characteristics. Training in any of these martial arts often includes corollary education in cultural customs because the philosophical approach to life practiced in that part of the world is understood as fundamental to understanding the proper use of the physical techniques.[7]

Films use this association between philosophical themes and martial arts to their advantage by deliberately linking the outward display of martial practice with the inner philosophical themes related to that particular martial art or region. However, it is important to also note a distinction between actual martial arts practice and their representation on film. For example, a common reason to fight in many Hong Kong martial arts is some variation of the argument "my school of kung fu is better than your school of kung fu" (see for instance *Drunken Master* [1978], *Wing Chun* [1994] and many others). Now, on one level, for those aware of certain subtle distinctions between the styles, this may in fact be a legitimate argument.[8] To those unfamiliar with such subtleties, the argument itself remains of course generalized "fighting words." Indeed, over time, as audience "connoisseurs" demanded more and more variety in the otherwise standard device of "my kung fu versus your kung fu," filmmakers began to play with the convention itself. In fact, some contrasting "styles" in martial arts films were

assassin's violence with being a parent. However, sequences with Kiddo's daughter, B.B., challenge that contrast. Here Bill explains to the little girl how he, the father who has raised her, shot her mother.



More on violence and parenting. Bill tells Kiddo about B.B.'s killing her beloved goldfish, which Bill proudly relates as the child's learning about life and death. After that, we see Kiddo and B.B. curled up together, watching a violent martial arts film.



A supposedly lifeless bride spits in the face of a police officer. Kiddo's unconscious act of defiance works as a visual shorthand to describe her deep inner resilience. Sports narratives trace the effect of a similar inner resilience, seeing it as the hero's best quality and often calling it "heart" or

invented just so the combatants would have something new to argue about—as was done in the case of “emotional kung fu” from 1979's *Fearless Hyena*.

Likewise, the practice of many martial arts is also often heavily influenced by traditional etiquette, an etiquette that can be cultural or linked only to that particular martial art (e.g., “bowing in” is probably the most widely-known example of this for Western observers). These traditions are often communicated via stories or myths surrounding the founding of that art. In this way, legendary figures and their exploits are also sometimes linked to the practice of a particular martial art, with corollary “secret” techniques associated with practice at the highest level. These martial arts “facts” become magnified when retold on film. Thus the exploits of legendary characters such as China's Wong Fei-hung or Japan's Miyamoto Musashi become even further exaggerated through multiple retellings on film. Likewise, their “secret techniques” often become more and more elaborate. All of this is fertile ground for any filmmaker looking for shortcuts to character description. In fact many of these elements—culturally specific practices, the exploits of legendary figures and secret techniques in particular—largely define the “martial arts” action film sub-genre.

In this same way, the inter-film borrowing Quentin Tarantino has become so famous for is not unique to him alone. In fact, as Warshow's idea of connoisseurship suggests, it is the very nature of genre films to rely on—and then tweak—established conventions. It should come as no surprise then that the primary aesthetic of Tarantino's homage to martial arts films, *Kill Bill*, is playful borrowing.

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“will.”



"Fighting spirit" is prized in sports narratives precisely because it shows inner will conquering the body's limitations. Here Kiddo, awakening out of a coma, is still semi-paralyzed. She visibly re-asserts autonomy by biting off a would-be rapist's lower lip.



Physical violence can create a fantasy of personal justice. Here, the audience gets visceral pleasure from seeing a rapist's head smashed in a doorway.

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The economy of connoisseurship



Legendary figures from martial arts mythology have extraordinary powers, which film's multiple retellings further exaggerate. Here, the big fight scene plays with Kiddo's superhuman strength and thus makes a playful commentary on the genre itself.



The mathematics of power fascinate us when one person fights against the many. This shot shows how the many (the Crazy 88's) respect the power of the one (Kiddo). Movement cues further highlight Kiddo's martial power, based on mastery and self-control. She stands motionless and centered

Nearly everything in *Kill Bill* operates in part as homage to other films. For instance, the opening credit sequence and music evoke memories of Hong Kong's legendary Shaw Brother's films of the 1970s. Several actors were chosen in part because of their links to famous martial arts stories. In particular, Bill is played by David Carradine of *Kung Fu* television series fame—even Bill's flute in *Kill Bill* is the same instrument Carradine played as Caine in that series. Hatori Hanzo is played by Sonny Chiba—who played several incarnations of that same character in the 1970s series *Shadow Warriors / Kage No Gundan*; in fact it was Tarantino's intention that *Kill Bill*'s Hanzo would essentially be the “100th incarnation” of that same character. And the characters Jonny Mo and Pai Mei are both played by Gordon Liu—of *The 36 Chambers of Shaolin* fame; there is also an additional significance that some film fans might note in that some of Liu's early films with Shaw Brothers involved his fighting against the same character Pai Mei that he plays in *Kill Bill*. There is thus a certain connoisseurship at work even in the casting. In this way, *Kill Bill* is strikingly postmodern in the sense that it deliberately plays with the audience's knowledge of its source material. For certain audience members, a large part of the pleasure of watching the films is therefore the sheer frisson of recognizing the references. As one review of *Kill Bill: Volume 1* noted:

“While you don't have to recognize a single reference to enjoy the movie, the very nature of the film also makes it a parlor game for hardcore film geeks. Ooo, is that strikingly designed shot from Hideo Gosha or Seijun Suzuki?... There's an element from *Once upon a time in the West*... that fight concept is from King Hu... Wait a minute, what is an early Brian De Palma scene doing here???” (Klein)

In addition to the actors already listed, another name in the opening credits, Yuen Wo-Ping, has particular significance for “hardcore” fans of martial arts films. Like

while the many skitter nervously around her. Merely a slight twitch of her body causes nervous movement within the circling group.



The theme of excess - especially blood - plays a large role in how Tarantino depicts this woman's stand against the Crazy 88's. Note fountains of blood spraying from two opponents on frame left.



Japanese samurai films from the 1970s on often used extreme blood effects. Tarantino takes the visual convention to even greater excess, thus playing with genre expectations.

other films, martial arts films have “stars” who supply economic and cultural clout; but unlike other types of films, martial arts film stars sometimes include fight directors. Yuen Wo-Ping, in particular, has become a highly recognizable name in the industry. His work became especially influential in the West after 2000 when *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* earned four academy awards and—more important—gained international success at the box office. Those familiar with a range of Hong Kong action films will recognize that the fight scenes in *Crouching Tiger* were not actually all that different from those Wo-Ping (and others) had been choreographing for years in Hong Kong. Yet the large budget *Crouching Tiger* enjoyed allowed much greater production values than many of the films Wo-Ping had worked on to that point. This, coupled with the international box office success of the film made that choreographic style instantly “hot.” As a result, one of Wo-Ping’s signature choreographic devices in which characters fight while “flying”—wire-work—quickly became the fighting style de jour in many action films. (A short list of films not choreographed by Wo-Ping that nevertheless imitate this style includes: *The Musketeer*, *The Brotherhood of the Wolf*, *Underworld*, *Charlie’s Angels*, *Charlie’s Angels: Full Throttle*, *Exit Wounds*, *Blade*, *Blade II* and many others.) It is therefore significant that Wo-Ping’s name is listed as “Martial Arts Advisor” in the opening credits, especially since Wo-Ping’s work on *Kill Bill* was not actually as extensive as it was on many of the other films that brought his name to prominence in the West. (Also, in this film, the prominence of the credit placement is an unusual honor for a fight director since such billing is usually buried in the final credits.)

In “The Making of *Kill Bill*: Volume 2,” David Carradine describes the process of fight direction in the films:

“In the script, the fights are described in detail. Basically, [Tarantino] designed the fights. He basically was the choreographer. When he first talked to Yuen Wo-Ping about him coming in and doing the picture, that was an idea he had. Why not have this guy from *Crouching Tiger* and the *Matrix*, you know, who did all these wonderful things? And he went through a lot of stuff with Wo-Ping and Wo-Ping said, ‘What do you need me for?’ and the truth is he doesn't need anybody else. He can probably make these movies all by himself.”



Symmetry in movement can seem comic. Sequences such as this one - in which Kido cleaves an opponent neatly in two - contribute to the fight sequence's postmodern playfulness.



Some choreographic devices now border on cliché. We've seen so many fights in silhouette that this sequence from *Kill Bill* can evoke memories from the entire action film genre.



Wire-work, fighting while "flying" or otherwise moving contrary to gravity, is one of Yuen Wo-ping's signature choreographic devices.

I mention this, not to downplay Wo-Ping's contribution to the films, but rather to highlight the fact that Tarantino's aesthetic—especially his noted familiarity with other films—greatly influenced the fight design. In other words, the fight scenes in *Kill Bill*—like much of the plot itself—were specifically designed as multi-layered homages to other films. The prominent placement of Wo-Ping's name in the credits demonstrates how important these fight scenes were for the overall marketing of the film. In fact, nearly all of the iconographic images used to market the films include references to fighting. (For example, all of the poster images for the film prominently feature a "Hatori Hanzo" katana). Using "star power" to market films in this manner is of course nothing new, but using the name of a fight director (here: "martial arts advisor") as an economic draw points out the extent to which *Kill Bill* operates within a larger framework of violent media consumption.

Philosopher Jean Baudrillard reconfigured Marxist theory to suggest that in the modern world, consumption—rather than production—is the basis of the social order. Where Marx identified contradictions between classes in relation to the production of commodities, Baudrillard suggests that modern distinctions between class and culture are now more the result of conspicuous consumption. Thus, for instance, the choice to buy a Mercedes rather than a Hyundai has more to do with buying into a system of class differentiation than it has to do with meeting basic transportation needs. Likewise, there is a certain economy of identity associated with being a film "connoisseur." Numerous websites exist in which fans of *Kill Bill* distinguish themselves into a type of social order based on who "gets" the references and who doesn't; who's seen a particular other film and who hasn't. In fact, even for those who are not "hardcore film geeks," the very choice to watch a film like *Kill Bill* rather than, say, a Merchant Ivory film or similar involves certain elements of social differentiation. In this sense, fans of *Kill Bill* can be seen as reveling in—or possibly directly challenging—the "low" culture status of their entertainment choice.^[9]

However, watching a film is even more of an ephemeral experience than is owning a Mercedes, and so if one wants to be an "action film connoisseur," one has to keep consuming the products that make one such. The products available for consumption include not only other live action films but also anime, comic books, video games (as in *Enter the Matrix* or many other video games that let



Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon's wire-work dazzled Western viewers unfamiliar with the convention. The film's international success made Wo-ping's style of fight choreography instantly "hot."



This sequence from *Kill Bill* follows almost the exact same choreographic formula as the sequence from *Crouching Tiger* above. A woman armed with a single sword is bouncing and spinning off of a wall to attack an opponent armed with double swords, who manages to parry the blow. What this picture does not show is how similar the two films' rhythms are, that is, the time it takes to perform the movements.

you "enter" the world of the film, including any of the numerous *Star Wars* or *Lord of the Rings* games, *Hulk*, *Predator versus Alien* and many, many more), books or magazine articles about the films, "the making of" style documentaries about the films, websites, action figures or collectable figurines, etc... all of which exist in a self-referential stream of commodification. In Baudrillardian terms we might say that all of these things are themselves also signs pointing towards other commodities. In this sense, many products in the "postmodern" world are simply part of a much larger web of marketing. Thus, films advertise games advertise spin-off products and so on. A viewer, and moreso a fan, cannot be a film connoisseur by simply buying or watching one product. The term itself only has meaning in relation to an entire system of products. As regards action films, the most significant point here is that one of the primary things—if not the primary thing—that links the objects together is violence: as a common theme in the stories, as common iconographies of representation, as the main selling point of the "action" in the video games and in the underlying embodied ethos of the stories themselves.^[10] Although many of these links have to do with "inner" things such as ethos, they must nevertheless be represented visually. One of the main spectatorial pleasures of watching *Kill Bill* for many film fans therefore is recognizing the iconographical or thematic shortcuts that link some of the stories together.

Fights in *Kill Bill* as character description

Even if viewers miss the significance of the title, our very introduction to world of *Kill Bill* suggests violence as an underlying ethos. The opening scene from *Kill Bill: Volume 1* showing a bloody Bride [Uma Thurman] about to be shot in the head, immediately establishes violence as a central theme for both films. That theme is reinforced by the lyrics to the opening song by Sonny Bono:

"Bang bang, he shot me down
Bang bang, I hit the ground
Bang bang, that awful sound
Bang bang, my baby shot me down."

Likewise, the first full scene (chapter 2) progresses as a prolonged martial arts fight between two assassins who used to be coworkers. This is a standard conceit for many martial arts films from the 1970s and early 1980s (as is the blaring music and flashback montage of the original



Kiddo and O-Ren Ishii fight in a snow covered Zen garden in a scene that directly juxtaposes violence and tranquility.



O-Ren's costume creates a number of juxtapositions: including violence with purity, and strength with beauty. Sword and scabbard deliberately extend and accentuate the line of the body. Further "play" comes from the fact that the "Chinese-American" Lucy Liu" plays the "Japanese" O-Ren.



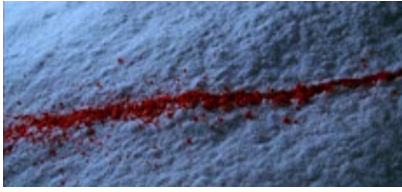
Red blood trickling into white snow suggests the Japanese Buddhist concept of *yugen* or ephemeral

"wrong" done to the lead character), but the connoisseur twist in *Kill Bill* is that this otherwise standard violent confrontation takes place in a quite house on a quite suburban Pasadena street. Even the weapons used in this fight highlight the unusual juxtaposition between the "epic" struggle of assassins and the "mundane" setting: fire irons, curio book-selves, kitchen knives and frying pans are all used. In fact, the defining moment of this fight comes as the two combatants pause in front of a picture window to watch a bus pull up and discharge a small girl home from school (Nikki Bell / Ambrosia Kelley). When the young girl then opens the front door, both fighters quickly hide their knives and cooperate to convince the girl that Beatrix Kiddo (Thurman) is just an "old friend of mommie's" (Vernita Green / Vivica A. Fox).

This exchange is meant to be funny, but it also dramatizes two important character traits of Kiddo. She is not only a highly trained martial artist bent on revenge, but she also has deep maternal qualities that extend even to the child of her enemy. Likewise, the fact that Kiddo can quickly "turn off" her immediate desire for revenge speaks to the professional nature of her martial ability. That is, although her quest for revenge is deeply personal, here we see it conducted in an almost detached manner. In this way, although the script uses her ability to do violence as a definitive character trait, so too it emphasizes her ability to choose not to do so. This subtle distinction later contrasts with the actions of other characters who have difficulty not being violent. In particular, Elle Driver / Darryl Hanna later expresses great dissatisfaction with not being allowed to kill the comatose Kiddo. And, most definitively defining a character, almost everything that we discover about Bill / Carradine in both films suggests that he is thoroughly given over to violent actions. In fact, he even describes himself as "a murdering bastard."

Kiddo's ability to turn *off* her impulse for revenge is a subtle distinction, but one crucial for audience empathy. Although she is described by the other major characters as a cold-blooded assassin and often acts as such, both films script in narrative shortcuts to suggest that Kiddo is undergoing a psychological change. In the world of action films, this process of change makes Kiddo a multi-dimensional, even complex, character. Therein too lies part of the connoisseurs' delight, for many characters in previous revenge films had little use for subtlety (Charles Bronson's character in *Death Wish* or Clint Eastwood's in *Dirty Harry* were particularly single-minded). In this early scene, Kiddo's speech to the little girl shortly after

beauty, which is considered among the highest forms of beauty.



Unlike other blows in the film, we do not see the cut that kills O-Ren. Instead we see blood spraying on clean white snow. Blood thrown from blades is a common iconographic theme in *Kill Bill*.



Women's role in violent stories has changed over the years. Trinity from *The Matrix* exemplifies a trend of showing women characters as personally empowered through their ability to do violence.

killing her mother also suggests a fairness missing from earlier vengeful characters:

"It was not my intention to do this in front of you. For that I'm sorry. But you can take my word for it, your mother had it coming. When you grow up, if you still feel raw about it, I'll be waiting."

In the shorthand of martial arts films, this fairness marks Kiddo as a deliberately honorable person, since a "bad" character would have tried to kill the child as well.^[11] More significantly, immediately after this act of relative compassion, we hear a voice-over by Sonny Chiba in Japanese (subtitled) quoting from a version of the samurai *bushido* code:

"For those regarded as warriors... when engaged in combat... the vanquishing of thine enemy can be the warrior's only concern. Suppress all human emotion and compassion... kill whoever stands in thy way, even if that be Lord God, or Buddha himself. This truth lies at the heart of the art of combat."

This deliberately philosophical quote coming so soon after Kiddo's act of compassion suggests that the character has started a fundamental inner transformation. Indeed the forcefulness of this advice even suggests that Kiddo's compassion might function for her as the martial-arts-film equivalent of a tragic flaw. Historically, most action films treat personal change as a dangerous thing (especially for assassins). In the same vein, setting up their protagonists' major flaws, films such as *Scarface*, *Carlito's Way* or even *The Karate Kid* highlight the dangers of only half-hearted commitment to violent actions. Thus, genre conventions suggest that Kiddo will most likely—yet knowingly—pay a personal price for failing to kill all her potential enemies.

Kiddo's compassionate, maternal side returns to take center stage in the conclusion to *Volume 2*. Toward the end of that film, we learn that Kiddo's discovery that she was pregnant led her to flee Bill in the first place (and thus set off his violent actions against her). Initially this realization motivates Kiddo not to want to fight anymore. As she says to the assassin sent to kill her: "I'm the deadliest woman in the world^[12] but right now I'm just scared shitless for my baby." Later she tells Bill:



Tarantino plays with concepts of strong female characters. Here Gogo Yubari (Chiaki Kuriyama) dresses as a Japanese schoolgirl (also the costume of a popular sexual fetish). She is also one of *Kill Bill's* most psychopathic characters.



Gogo's violent actions directly challenge traditional gender roles. The ability to do violence means one thus has the ability to coerce or control others by force. Such a trait visibly marks a character as "powerful." In this way, violent actions within a film's narrative may seem to "empower" female characters. The degree to which this empowerment is either "real" or "good" remains controversial.

"Before that [pregnancy test] strip turned blue... I was a killer who killed for you. Before that strip turned blue I would have jumped a motorcycle onto a speeding train [a possible reference to Michelle Yeoh's signature stunt in *Supercop*]... but once that strip turned blue I could no longer do any of those things... because I was going to be a mother."

This speech's rhyming, poetic construction characterizes Tarantino's signature use of heightened language. But even more significant, the rhyme scheme here is broken up by the word "mother." Thus the film deliberately juxtaposes the role of an assassin alongside the role of a mother—first seen in the living room fight described above. Likewise, part of the connoisseur's joy of watching the films comes from the script twist in which Tarantino seems to suggest that violence shapes both roles. For example in the final confrontation, Bill describes to Kiddo with pride how their daughter B.B. / Perla Hanley-Jardine "learned about life and death" by deliberately killing her beloved goldfish, Emilio.

In fact, the title itself tells us that the conclusion to *Volume 2* is never in doubt (we know Kiddo will kill Bill). So it is fitting that the final confrontation between the two is not visually dramatic in the same manner as any of the other fights in either film. Rather, the titular fight is conducted as a philosophical debate about Kiddo's possible maternal abilities—given the fact that she is, as Bill suggests, a "natural born killer" (also a reference to a film of the same name). We are shown repeatedly throughout both films how Kiddo lives as a ruthless, trained assassin. In fact, major sequences from both films are devoted to showing the rigors of her training (especially in sequences showing Kiddo's training with Pai Mei) or the ruthlessness of an assassin's life (especially in those scenes dealing with the "Origin" of O-Ren Ishii). In this sense, the film itself is not simply a revenge drama, but also a story of redemption. The only way that Kiddo can deserve a normal life is to pay penance for her own past life. This penance, however, takes the form of more violent actions, involving both Kiddo's ability to inflict harm upon others as well as her ability to endure pain and injury herself.

[Continued: Penance and power](#)

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Penance and power



Kill Bill 2's showpiece fight is between Kiddo and Elle Driver in a trailer home, another epic battle in a mundane setting. Here Kiddo uses a lamp as an improvised weapon.



The combat in “Elle and I” uses what seem “male” tactics. Here Kiddo attempts to drown Elle in a filthy toilet. Note the pornographic magazine deliberately positioned in the shot.

Early in *Volume 1* we discover that the opening scene’s shot to Kiddo’s head has put her into a coma for four years. We also learn that her body has been used to service rapists who include her nurse, Buck. A discussion between these rapists then reveals that that Kiddo is “a spitter... It’s a motor reflex thing.” Their description of her unconscious defiance speaks directly to the idea of character as a core value. We are then given a clue to the previously comatose woman’s inner indomitable spirit through the simple visual shortcut of watching her spit in people’s faces. Likewise, the fierceness of this spirit is visually re-confirmed when Kiddo then rips off an attackers’ lower lip with her teeth. Immediately thereafter, Kiddo visually re-establishes her newfound physical autonomy by repeatedly smashing Buck’s head between the door and doorframe. Justification for this murderous violence comes with a short flashback montage in which we see Buck returning again and again to “fuck.” This flashback leads into a shot of Kiddo’s crushing Buck’s head with the door. In this way, narratively the flashback also sets up audience response, since it gives viewers permission to enjoy the visceral thrill of watching a rapist get his head crushed. Thus even in this brief sequence, we can see several character shorthands at work through the language of violent action. The shorthands here include visually establishing Kiddo’s indomitable spirit even while unconscious, the re-establishment of her physical, personal autonomy, and her burning desire for justifiable revenge. Significantly, all of these critical character traits and motivations are established through the language of violent actions alone.

Likewise, Kiddo’s inner strength is shown as a conduit for almost superhuman bodily mastery. In the next sequence, we see Kiddo force herself to first wiggle her toe and then learn to walk again. Bodily mastery of this sort plays a recurrent role in martial arts mythology and recurs throughout both *Kill Bill* films. Thus, in *Volume 2* Kiddo escapes from being buried alive by remembering Pai Mei’s lessons about the strength of human willpower, and in *Volume 1* her superhuman will is particularly developed in



Kiddo throws a can of tobacco spit in Elle's face. This entire fight highlights Tarantino's willingness to play with "lower" themes. The crude nature of combat here directly contrasts with other films, such as *Crouching Tiger*, which deliberately aestheticize violence - in part to make it more palatable to "intellectuals."



Kiddo and Elle push back and forth, each attempting to dominate the other. Visually violence is a simple marker of power and can convey what each movement is meant to signify.



Kiddo and Elle kick each

the film's showpiece fight, the showdown at the House of Blue Leaves.

This showpiece fight is a tour de force of choreographed film action. The fight lasts for nearly twenty minutes and unfolds in two parts. First, there is a mass battle against the "Crazy 88s" followed by a singular duel against O-Ren Ishii in a snow covered Zen garden. Kiddo's battle against the Crazy 88s is structured as a quintessential grind house fight. Not only does it have all the standard elements, it has so many in fact, that it doesn't actually represent a fight unto itself as much as it seems to represent the entirety of the genre. For instance, as in many grind house films, this fight begins with killing of superfluous subordinates, then moves on to a feature fight against an intermediate adversary (here a character named Gogo Yubari / Chiaki Kuriyama^[13]), then progresses to larger battle against multiple opponents, and only then moves on to the final duel between equally matched opponents (O Ren Ishii / Lucy Liu). There are three main connoisseur twists in this long sequence:

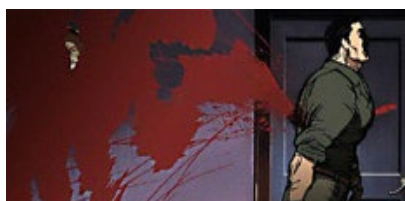
- its many standard elements, taken to extremes
- women as most of the featured fighters—including Kiddo, Gogo, and O-Ren
- its non-standard musical score.

This fight's long multiple-opponent sequence is staged in accordance with Wo-Ping's style of Hong Kong wire work. It is also mixed with authentic Japanese sword work —*kenjutsu*—taught to Thurman by Sonny Chiba. Few martial arts clichés or images are left out of this part of the fight, in either rhythm and phrasing, imagery, sound-effect, visual effect, weaponry, props or tableaux. In this sense, the fight itself is not meant to be exciting or suspenseful as much as it is meant to be intellectually entertaining and even humorous with respect to the references these homages invoke. Likewise, the final fight in the snow is both a direct homage to the film *Lady Snowblood* (*Shurayukihim*, 1973) and a visual shorthand for the Buddhist (read: samurai) aesthetic of *yugen* (ephemeral beauty). This philosophy sees beauty in the fragility of life. Here such a core "samurai" belief is visually portrayed in the scene by blood spattered upon clean white snow in a Zen garden. Thus we can see in the showdown at the House of Blue Leaves a sequence in which violent imagery communicates not only plot (Kiddo progresses another step in her revenge plan), but also relative character strength (who wins or loses), and even

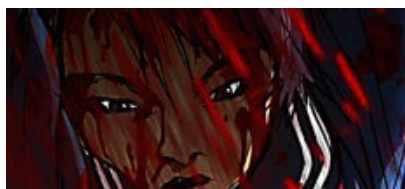
other in almost perfect synchronization. As in the House of Blue Leaves fight, symmetry here also allows the fight to be comic.



A scene from *Kill Bill 1*'s "The Origin of O-Ren": Anime often highlights the presence of blood and the contortion of broken and dismembered bodies.



The story of the origin of O-Ren Ishii is told almost entirely through violent imagery. Here blood sprays from the body of O-Ren's father. Note the careful construction of the imagery with its "serious" use of shadow and a composition dominated by blood.



extreme subtleties of aesthetics and mood (*yugen*).

One of the things for which Tarantino is famous is his juxtapositions: especially his innovative use of music to reinvent otherwise well-established visual narratives, and the use of heightened language or debate in mundane circumstances. The effectiveness of these juxtapositions usually depends on the audience's knowledge of conventional use. For instance, much of the effect of having flamenco music play over a samurai sword fight (as it does in the final fight in the snow) relies in part on recognizing the dissonance with standard conventions. However, Tarantino also plays with more widely known themes. In the fight sequence, he does this by juxtaposing stereotypical female gender roles with extremely violent—even sociopath—behavior. In particular he dresses Gogo as a Japanese schoolgirl (which is also the outfit of a particular sexual fetish) and O-Ren in traditional kimono (which forces a demure, shuffling gait). Thus the violent actions of these female characters—among the most extreme in either film—are used to parody the gender roles themselves. [14]

There is clearly an economic reason for the juxtaposition of gender and violence, one summed up by Jessyica A. Fox when she notes that "films about girls kicking ass are really in nowadays" (*The Making of Kill Bill: Volume 1*). Yet there is also a deeper social significance to this economics. Since violence is also a narrative marker of personal power, whenever a female character succeeds in a violent confrontation, she also succeeds in marking herself as powerful. Accordingly, Thurman describes *Kill Bill* as "an intensely empowered female movie" (ibid.). Furthermore, following Warshow's theory of connoisseurship, every film that plays with traditional gender roles in this way slowly changes the audience's expectations of those same roles. And there has indeed been a significant change in the way female violence has been represented on film over the years.[15] At this point in time, few critics have lingered on the fact that that the action hero of *Kill Bill* is female; however, a few have noted that the film is part of a wider trend in which sexy female action heroes are most definitely "in" (Angelina Jolie's *Laura Croft: Tomb Raider*, Carrie-Anne Moss's character, Trinity, from the *Matrix* and Jennifer Gardner's character, Electra, from *Daredevil* are also exemplary of this trend).

The showpiece fight of *Volume 2* (Chapter Nine: Elle and I) also plays with gender roles. As Tarantino notes, since it is the main fight of *Volume 2*,

Anime and live-action films often borrow conventions from each other. Here a dark background and predominance of shadow suggest a “seriousness” to the emotional content. This anime shot of blood spraying in front of the face of a young O-Ren will be deliberately copied in a later live-action sequence ...



... with blood spraying in front of the face of O-Ren. Different ambient lighting creates a less serious mood here than in the anime sequence.



Blood erupts from the body of Boss Matsumoto. With an emotional quality visually represented through a geyser-like eruption of blood, here violent imagery creates a mood as well as propels the narrative.

“It has to kind of top the House of Blue Leaves [fight] not in grandeur, but in emotion. You want to see these two fight. You want to see her kick Elle Driver’s ass. Its dramatic and its satisfying and its brutal” (*Making of Kill Bill: Volume 2*).

In fact, the very brutality of this fight provides a connoisseur twist since fights of this nature are traditionally coded as “masculine.” Indeed, almost everything about the fight makes it something we might otherwise consider a “guy” fight. The two women fight inside a filthy trailer home, and they each employ numerous dirty tricks, including feet stomps, kicks to the groin, faces shoved into dirty toilets, and even a can of tobacco juice thrown in Elle’s face. All of this is also in keeping with the ongoing theme of standard martial arts motifs being deployed in mundane settings. This recurrent theme in *Kill Bill* here provides an additional connoisseur jolt by also demonstrating Tarantino’s willingness to play with “lower” themes (as some argue the entire action genre to be).

The overall fight sequence in “Elle and I” is structured in two parts: the first, as discussed, a dirty “masculine” fight. The second part is then based on a standard Hong Kong martial arts theme of revenge for the killing of a beloved teacher (we discover that Elle had “treacherously” poisoned Pai Mei). This second fight takes place as an evenly matched duel between warriors with matching “Hatori Hanzo” swords. Again, the images are taken almost directly from countless similar male movies, with a humorous twist at the end when Kiddo suddenly plucks out Elle’s remaining eye and steps on it.

Here, as elsewhere, the fight constitutes the plot. Even such “brutality,” however, is not “gratuitous” in the sense of simply superfluous movement. Nor does violence provide an “excuse” for a display of sexualized bodies. Rather, this fight and others like it are the very reason that audiences watch the film in the first place. The story itself unfolds and revelations about the characters are revealed *through* these violent actions. Here we see the lengths to which the characters are willing to go to secure their goals. The film shows a competition between the characters testing both their inner and outer strength molded by dedicated training. In this depiction of the cinematic use of a samurai theme, three iconographic visual elements and plot moments require additional consideration as central components of the ways many such stories are told:



- excessive use of blood
- special status accorded to the Hatori Hanzo “samurai” swords
- prolonged training sequences.

[Continued: Iconography of blood](#)

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The blood effects in this scene parallel those in the Boss Matsumoto anime sequence above. In the anime version, fountaining blood forms a “serious” aesthetic, while in the live version, the sheer excess plays as comic.

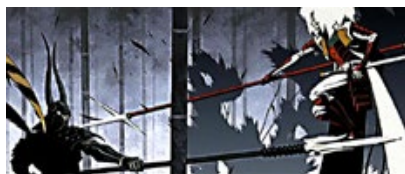


Buried alive, Kidō punches the inside of the coffin until her knuckles bleed. Here blood is a shorthand for Kidō’s inner desire. Her inner strength transcends a body’s normal limitations.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The iconography of blood



Reciprocal borrowing: The composition of this scene from *The Animatrix* (a warrior standing on her opponent's blade) also occurs in many Hong Kong action films. The scene further mixes this visual with "Japanese" martial arts aesthetics.



Pai Mei stands on Kiddo's blade: In Hong Kong action films the pose occurs so often that it is now almost iconographic of extreme martial power.

Significantly *Volume 1*'s "Chapter Three: the Origin of O-Ren" unfolds largely through *anime* and almost entirely violent imagery. In fact, although a voice-over explains part of the story, the plot itself unfolds only as a sequence of violent actions or images. The course of these images depicts a knife held to the throat of a mother, a father defending himself against multiple armed attackers, the eyes of a child burning with rage, the mother grabbed by the hair and thrown onto a bed, a sword-point lodging into the floor next to the young girl's head as she hides beneath the bed, a slowly widening puddle of blood as we discover that the mother has been killed, a young girl's angry face covered in blood, the girl later slowly driving a sword into the chest of her father's murderer (Boss Matsumoto), O-Ren as a lithe woman in red holding a sniper-rifle, POV through the sniper scope, and finally POV of a bullet as it passes through O-Ren's assassination victim. The images—much more so than the voice-over—convey the story of O-Ren's drive to empower herself through violence. We discover through these visual, iconographic shortcuts a wealth of information about the character: not only about her ability to kill, but also about the psychological underpinnings of her strength and thus something about her inner nature.

Amine violence often accentuates the presence of blood or the contortions of broken bodies. These effects are less easy to accomplish in live action, but aid telling certain stories in animation. Animated characters express subtle emotion poorly, and so animated stories usually avoid subtlety of any type, opting for other tactics in which the medium can excel even live footage. Interestingly, a back and forth borrowing often takes place in the competition between media: just as anime borrows film conventions, so too do filmmakers often borrow anime conventions. This inter-media borrowing is well documented for standard cinematic effects such as POV angles and shot composition, but is less well documented as far as violence is concerned. As a fight director, I can tell you that this exact sort of borrowing does in fact take place: we steal ideas from anywhere and everywhere, especially



The mode of use for a “samurai” sword involves counter-cutting (avoiding and striking) rather than parry-riposte (blocking and then striking). This preparatory pose - from *The Animatrix* - characterizes the weapon’s martial use. The image is widely used to represent the ideology and mythology of the “samurai” mindset. But few martial arts films (including those shown here) actually use the sword according to its martial function. Almost all choreographed fights use parry-ripostes because they are both more “theatrical” and easier to follow.



Note that Kiddo holds her Hatori Hanzo sword in the same iconographic grip. Yet neither Kiddo nor that animated warrior actually use this preparatory position to counter strike (its main martial purpose). Instead both films use the pose to communicate something about the inner life of the characters, in particular, their calm and

from media that tell similar tales. In this way there is a sort of circular influence that often takes place in the ways that violent stories are told: film influences anime influences comic books influences video games influences films and so on and on. In fact, one of the most obvious examples of this reciprocal influence is in the fountains of blood that occur in both the anime sequence in *Kill Bill* and in live action shots throughout the rest of the film.

In the anime sequence, when the sword that kills O-Ren’s father is removed from his body, a veritable fountain of blood shoots forth in a variety of forms: first as a wide and fast-moving spray, then as distinct droplets hanging motionless in the air, then as a hose-like stream from his chest, then as a rain that falls in front of O-Ren’s face, then finally as a mist of tiny droplets slowly painting the father’s face. The “camera” then pans up the entire length of the straight single-edged Japanese sword (a *ninja-to*: a shorthand way to show that the killers were modern day ninjas or assassins). Blood likewise forms the primary aesthetic through which we witness O-Ren’s mother’s death: as a puddle slowly spreading until it covers the entire frame and then drips down like heavy raindrops onto the young girl’s face. And it forms the primary aesthetic when O-Ren enacts her revenge on Boss Matsumoto where blood sprays so violently from the old man’s body that a silhouette of the young O-Ren is left on the wall and the blood continues spraying for several implausible second thereafter.

This same aesthetic is played for laughs later when the story returns to live action and O-Ren chops the head off of a man, Boss Tanaka, who insults her Chinese heritage. In this scene, there is also a fountain of blood that lasts for an improbable amount of time. Here, although the fountain of blood is played for its comic effect (beginning much like a garden sprinkler, then slowing in bursts until it trickles to nothing), the iconography is almost exactly the same at that in the anime sequences. This same iconography also comes into play in the large battle sequence at the House of Blue Leaves where it takes on a further significance, as a slightly comic homage to countless Japanese action films that used similar blood effects (comic in that it accents the excessiveness of the iconography). In all of these sequences where excessive blood and samurai swords combine, the choreography includes the use of a movement—called a *chiburi* (“blood shedding technique:” a flick of the sword to shake blood

trained willingness to risk death in a confrontation.



Shedding blood from blades is a visual theme that runs throughout *Kill Bill* 1. Here, a “bad guy” ritualistically wipes the blood of O-Ren’s father from the blade before handing the sword to Boss Matsumoto, who will use it to kill O-Ren’s mother.



Chiburi are movement techniques used to shed blood from a samurai sword. Over time *ronin*, masterless samurai, developed a number of flashy *chiburi* that were used primarily for showing off, much as Western gunfighters twirled their pistols. Here, Kiddo uses a striking *ronin chiburi* to knock blood from the blade, in effect, showing off her power.

from the blade)—that accentuates the presence of blood even while there is a lull in the fighting. This throwing of blood from the blade is a useful choreographic device in part because it forces the body into a momentarily upright, almost heroic, pose that is recognizable from countless other visual media, including fantasy novel cover art, comic books, anime and live action films. Tarantino’s connoisseur twist is that he accompanies this pose with an ambient sound of blood splashing onto solid surfaces, thus adding an element that does not appear in other renditions of the movement.

The iconography of the samurai sword

Chiburi also combine the theme of blood with the imagined tactile sensation of holding a sword. Indeed, swords have a great visceral quality; and in my business it is not at all uncommon for students to become almost obsessed with them. In fact, many people fetishize swords to the extent that they become almost magical objects. There are a number of reasons for this, but primarily a sword communicates a bodily sensation. One can hold a sword, feel a sword, swing a sword (even if only if in one’s imagination). This in turn allows a sort of physical interaction—a weight, a heft, a texture, a tactile reality—with any mythology associated with that weapon (in fact, many people played with swords as children in exactly this way and later fondly remember the vicarious empowerment and escapist thrills associated with that type of play). In other words, physical objects such as swords give place and substance—an embodiment—to otherwise esoteric ideas. In this way the “samurai” sword comes to represent the entire mythos of Japanese and sometimes an even broader “Asian” philosophy and history. In semiotic terms, the object is “overdetermined” in that it contains so many potential codes that that a *frisson*—the sheer excitement of its presence—also becomes a part of its meaning. Thus, the power of the iconography in the poster for *Kill Bill* (a simple Hatori Hanzo sword blade held in a strong female grip) is that it invokes all of the related stories (in a variety of media) that also tell stories about this mythology.

This iconography is initially played for laughs in *Volume 1* when we first meet the legendary sword-maker Hatori Hanzo working as a chef in a dingy sushi restaurant; but then it becomes serious after Hanzo and his assistant agree to forge a blade for Kiddo. After forging this blade, Hanzo handles it with ritualized reverence and imbues the

sword with deep, almost mythic, significance by saying:

“I’ve completed doing what I swore an oath to God, 28 years ago to never do again. I have created ‘Something that kills people.’ And in that purpose, I was a success. I’ve done this because philosophically, I am sympathetic to your aim. I can tell you with no ego, this is my finest sword. If on your journey, you should encounter God, God will be cut.”



After defeating the Crazy 88, Kiddo throws blood from her blade before making a speech to the wounded. This *chiburi* pose throws the body into a momentarily upright, almost proud position, highlighting the inner life that accompanies the martial movement.



Kiddo pauses momentarily after delivering the killing blow to O-Ren Ishii. Here, the sword is used as a way to dramatically extend and highlight the natural lines of the body. An emotional quality follows movements such as this because of the natural openness of the chest and the resulting intake of breath.

"Hatori Hanzo steel" thus becomes a single iconic manifestation of—a shorthand for—the entire mythos already attached to the samurai sword (*katana*).^[16] Such a visual connotation is further reinforced throughout the film by a clean ringing sound whenever a Hanzo blade is drawn or quickly moved (similar auditory cues are used in many films whenever swords are present).

From this point until the end of *Volume 1*, almost everyone is shown carrying *katana* (on the backs of motorcycles, even in the plane’s set next to Kiddo as she flies to Japan to kill O-Ren). In this way, the theme of violence established from the very beginning of the film becomes tied to the deeper philosophies of *bushido*, the mythic “rules” of samurai life and—especially—death. One of the primary tenets of *bushido* is that a warrior should willingly accept death as a consequence of any action. The “samurai” sword, combined with Kiddo’s solo pursuit of vengeance in the face of multiple enemies, thus becomes a shorthand way to link Kiddo to countless stories of samurai bravery. ^[17] Audiences will understand this shorthand by degree according to their familiarity with these other tales. But again, it is violence—or at least the link between the character’s willingness to kill and possibly die for a cause and “bravery”—that allows the film to communicate the depth of these links.

The power of penance

Many martial arts films include lengthy “training” sequences in which we see the hero voluntarily undergoing often severe physical and emotional trauma; yet few film scholars have questioned why these sequences are so ubiquitous. As with violence, film can represent physical pain visually and so use it to indicate something about a character’s inner emotional state. In this same way, a script that shows a character voluntarily subjecting herself to physical pain also tells us something about the inner “strength” or “desire” of that character.



Iconography similar to *Kill Bill*'s occurs in many martial arts films. For example in this scene from *The Last Samurai*, note the use of blood, the "samurai" ethos of willingness to risk death, the open chest posture, the emotional quality expressed through the movement, and the idea of personalized power. These are all expressed through violent imagery.



The samurai sword is so overdetermined in its referents that a single image can convey a wealth of information. The poster for *Kill Bill: Volume 1* shows how important violence - or more precisely, the history and ethos of martial arts

Martial arts films often therefore use training sequences as a shorthand description of the strength of a character's inner desire ("heart" or "willpower").

The long training sequence in *Volume 2*, "Chapter Eight: The Cruel Tutelage of Pai Mei," uses audience familiarity with this convention as the starting place for several narrative jokes. For example, when Bill looks at the long flight of stone steps, he says to Kiddo: "Just seeing those steps again makes me ache. You're going to have a lot of fun carrying buckets of water up and down that fucker." In another taunt, Bill comments on the time-line of Kiddo's apprenticeship:

"No sarcasm, no backtalk, at least not for the first year or so. You're going to have to let him warm up to you. He hates Caucasians, despises Americans and has nothing but contempt for women; so in your case, it might take a little while."

These statements are double coded in that they also refer to training sequences in countless other films including the TV series *Kung Fu*—in which Carradine starred—and *The 36 Chambers of Shaolin*—in which Gordon Liu (who here plays Pai Mei) starred. In fact, the long training sequence with Pai Mei, like the fight at the House of Blue Leaves, is not so much a single unified sequence as it is a collage of similar sequences from many other films. As such, again, a great deal of the viewing pleasure comes from being a film geek and recognizing the references. (The fact that Gordon Liu here plays the part of Pai Mei, a character he fought in his early film career, simply adds another potential layer of discovery into the mix.)

In *Kill Bill*, this training sequence is therefore not only a shorthand for Kiddo's inner desire, but also a shorthand way of linking Kiddo's story to other stories. For example, the original film *Pei Mei* exists very nearly as a demigod: even his clothing and beard are meant to recall legends of the eight immortals of Chinese mythology. The story of his secret technique in *Kill Bill*, the "five point palm exploding heart technique" (described as "the deadliest blow in all of martial arts"), is likewise told as a fairy tale set "once upon a time in China" (which is also the title of a film about the legendary martial artist Wong Fei-hung). Tarantino sets up his narrative joke by taking a common theme of the

films and their associated violent action sequences - is to the marketing of the film.



The first glimpse we get of Bill in *Kill Bill 1* is of a hand lovingly caressing a samurai sword. This simple image is able to convey a great deal about the character, including a martial ethic that values the trained ability to take life. Note the demon figure on the scabbard, which highlights Bill's association with death and destruction.



Hatori Hanzo and his assistant handle a new sword with ritualized reverence. Visual, auditory, narrative, and performance cues such as this in both films code Hatori Hanzo swords as an embodied manifestation of the entire “samurai” ethos.

marital arts genre (secret techniques) just a little bit farther than normal. This film's secret technique's name is just a little longer, with just enough additional flourish to recall a multitude of other films.

In a similar way, when we see a flashback training sequence in which Pai Mei plucks out one of Elle Driver's (Darryl Hannah) eyes, we know that he is more powerful than she is. So too when Kiddo later does the same thing to Driver's other eye (in the “Elle and I” fight) we not only learn that she is more powerful than Driver, but also that she has gained a power similar to Pai Mei's. By referencing all of the other Pai Mei films, it is therefore possible to compare Kiddo's martial arts strength to imaginary opponents beyond those in *Kill Bill* (and in fact, fans on several web sites have done exactly that). Likewise, Kiddo's mastery of Pai Mei's legendary “five point palm exploding heart technique”—which she uses to kill Bill—works as a shorthand way of demonstrating that Kiddo has become among “the deadliest” people in the world. In fact, in an earlier scene between Elle Driver / Hannah and Budd / Michael Madson, we discover that Kiddo's code name, Black Mamba, can be interpreted as “death incarnate.” The wider connoisseur twist in this depiction of the protagonist's training and expertise is that Kiddo's story now exists on par with a wide variety of other stories of people with nearly superhuman abilities. In fact, Kiddo's character could conceivably now even be used in any number of role playing games (video or otherwise) in which characters from diverse stories are brought together to “fight it out.”

The dangers of hidden moral instruction

Many people's attraction to violent stories have less to do with the violence itself than with the potential power that the violence narratively represents. This attribution of power to the violent lends a dark side to narratives of violent empowerment; yet one different from that which many critics of media violence suppose. In fact, as I hope I have shown, narrative violence is almost never the mindless spectacle that most critics describe. Yet its very mindfulness—its links to displays of deeper character strength and philosophical themes—may also be a major source of its pervasive seductiveness. The simple world view narrative violence allows also reinforces old adages that “might makes right.”

Also largely unacknowledged, violent narratives often



"Hatori Hanzo steel" is held in such reverence that the swords become very nearly characters in their own right. Here Budd initiates a subplot in which he tries to sell "the greatest sword ever made by a man," an effort that results in his death.

suggest a personal—embodied—definition of power unassociated with traditional power markers such as wealth or status in society. This may partially account for the fact that violent stories are often also disproportionately embraced by those groups disenfranchised from traditional power structures. In other words, the (transgressive) inner life of the characters that violence visually outwardly embodies may be the most socially influential part of media violence. Yet no one to date—neither critics nor fight directors—has addressed this aspect of narrative violence (nor does the purview of this present article allow me to do so now). This lack of attention partially derives from the fact that few media critics fully understand how and why narrative violence works. Nor do those of us who design these scenes of violence often consider the social implications of our trade. By bringing some of the insights of fight directors to a wider critical audience, I hope to begin to change the way that film violence is perceived by those media critics most capable of analyzing these stories' social implications. As I also hope to have shown, *Kill Bill* is not unique in its narrative use of violent imagery, but is rather exemplary of much larger social trends.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes



Throughout the long training sequence with Pai Mei, marital ability is deliberately linked to “power.” Training sequences in most action films do the same.



Pai Mei effortlessly avoids Kiddo's attack and fights without using a weapon or even taking his hands from behind his back. His ease visually demonstrates their relative power by making clear the degree to which he overmatches Kiddo.

1. Campbell describes this in many of his works, including: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), *Transformations of Myth through Time* (1990), and in his interview with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (1988).

2. In *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002), John Lawrence and Robert Jewett suggest a reconfiguration of this structure for American film heroes: many of whom never return to their original world, but instead remain partially of the liminal world (i.e. ride off into the sunset).

3. In fact a substantial portion of the viewing public will actively seek out such entertainments whether they are readily available or not, as was the case with U.S. fans of Hong Kong action films—such as Tarantino—before those films became widely distributed on video. Most attempts to censor media violence fail to recognize the direction of this economic flow and so rather opt for sound-byte friendly calls to limit production.

4. For instance, “ninja” themes were very hot in the late 1970s and early 80s, and “muscular” male action stars were hot in the late 1980s, but neither of these themes play very well today.

5. For this reason, too, most of the actual subtleties of martial arts are left out of martial arts film fights (for only a very select few would recognize what was going on).

6. In fact, association with philosophy is also one of the reasons that Eastern martial arts have become synonymous with the term. In other words, Western martial arts such as boxing or fencing are in fact, “martial arts,” but are rarely thought of as such because their practice consists almost entirely of technique with little or no emphasis on deeper universal harmonies.

7. For example, the practice of *T'ai Qi Quan* (or *Tai Chi Chuan*) is fundamentally linked to an early Chinese version of Taoism. Likewise *Kyudo* (feudal Japanese archery) in its purest form is taught in conjunction with an early Japanese form of Zen Buddhism.



Prolonged training lets us see characters voluntarily suffer physical pain and judge the strength of their inner desire. The way Kiddo suffers humiliation without complaint suggests to us her deep inner resilience and personal fortitude.



Movement cues and other cues such as blood and pain highlight the characters' relative power. Pai Mei effortlessly plucks out Elle's eye, which shows he has absolute mastery over not only his own body, but over Elle's as well. Likewise, the fact that Elle could not bear the pain and humiliation of training as well as Kiddo suggests something lacking in Elle's inner character.

8. Legitimate arguments could be anything from broad philosophical debate—such as the differences between “hard” styles or “soft” styles—to specific regional rivalries—such as the differences between “Northern” or “Southern” styles of Chinese kung fu forms.

9. In fact, fans of other “low” culture violent entertainments such as professional wrestling can be seen commenting on the “low culture” status of their entertainment community in very explicit ways.

10. David Carradine suggests something similar when he notes in *The Making of Kill Bill Volume 2*: “The essence of [*Kill Bill*] is not the violence, not the action, its the inside look at the mind and the heart of violent people.”

11. There is also a double coding at work in these words, for in the world of modern Hollywood, these words also open the door for a sequel, as does the question mark hanging over Daryl Hannah's name in the closing credit sequence from *Kill Bill 2* (and, in fact, this sequel is already planned).

12. In fact, in an earlier scene between Elle Driver (Hannah) and Budd (Michael Madson), we discover that Kiddo's code name, Black Mamba can be interpreted as “death incarnate.”

13. Yet another connoisseur twist is that Kuriyama also starred in the hit bloodletting film *Battle Royale* (2001) / *Batoru Rowaiaru* (2000).

14. This is also evident in the speech O-Ren gives immediately after beheading a henchmen who challenged her racial background and thus ability to head the Japanese yakuza—in this instance O-Ren's violence is directly juxtaposed with the speech cliché's of a “sensitive” and “open” leadership style.

15. For instance although the 1978 film *Day of the Woman* (aka: “*I Spit on Your Grave*”) told the story of a female rape-revenge, the poster advertising the film nevertheless relied on highly sexualized imagery. In 1991, *Thelma and Louise* likewise involved a rape-revenge scenario (both the attempted rape of Thelma and the past rape of Louise), yet was marketed without such blatantly exploitive imagery. And, while *Thelma and Louise* ignited debate about proper gender roles and violence, by 2003 and the release of *Monster*, audiences seemed willing to



When Kiddo plucks out Elle's remaining eye, we see Kiddo can exercise a power similar to Pai Mei's, who seemed nearly a demi-god. As the suddenness of Kiddo's jab brings this unexpected revelation, the audience may respond with wry humor, the ah-ha of recognition.



Bill's sudden use of firearms suggests a ruthlessness in his inner character. But the final duel between Kiddo and Bill does not involve this gun, even though their showdown takes place only moments after this scene. Here guns function as shorthand for temporary power: one is "powerful" only while the gun is out. Hand-to-hand martial ability, here involving swords, visually suggests a fully embodied, because always available, power.

accept that women might even be serial killers.

16. There are many variations of "samurai swords"; technically the ones used in the film are *katana*.

17. In fact, earlier in the film, Kiddo even re-sheaths the knife she uses to kill Vernita Green (Vivica A. Fox) in the manner of a *katana*.

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Kiddo and Bill fight to the death. Although Bill has a gun and Kiddo is not expecting the attack, he nevertheless chooses to attack with a sword. The final fight is thus conducted according to Tarantino's main themes - personalized power, swords as icons of "samurai" ethos, and martial movement as both visual spectacle and visible window into the characters' inner emotional life.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Hydraulic, corporate mining practices



The hydraulic mining water cannon puts out a stream with a force of 200 lb. of pressure per square inch.



Hydraulic mining mows the mountain side down, trees and all.



The LaHood operation uses this technique, developed around 1850.

Pale Rider

Environmental politics, Eastwood style

by [Joseph K. Heumann](#) and [Robin L. Murray](#)

They just literally mow the mountains away, you know, the trees and everything... all that was outlawed in California some years ago, and they still do it in Montana and a few places.” (Eastwood quoted in “turnerclassicmovies.com”).[\[1\]](#)

It was outlawed way back, even before ecological concerns were as prevalent as they are today. So we play on that in the film. It’s kind of an ecological statement. (Eastwood quoted in Frayling 135).

Instead of focusing only on classic western conflicts, Clint Eastwood’s 1985 remake of *Shane*, *Pale Rider* highlights and critiques the consequences of 1850s-1880’s corporate mining and, perhaps, its continued repercussions into the 1980s. Unlike any other Eastwood Western, *Pale Rider* provides its audience with a clear vision of the environmental horrors hydraulic mining causes, even including a detailed description of the technique, while showing the devastating results of a great engineering feat. Deep into the film, Josh LaHood, the corporate miner’s son (Christopher Penn) explains how he and his men are able to thrust 200 hundred pounds of pressure per square inch of water at the side of a mountain, a process called hydraulic mining.

Josh LaHood describes the process to fourteen-year-old Megan Wheeler, a prospector’s daughter. His detailed description of this mining technique

engineered around 1850 is juxtaposed with images of falling trees and soil devastated by the water shooting out of monitors, the water cannons used to strip the hills of topsoil and growth to make the gold beneath easier to find. According to Josh LaHood,



Josh LaHood, the corporate mining baron's son.



Water cannons strip the hills of topsoil, making the gold beneath easier to find.



The LaHood operation provides jobs for a multi-ethnic, local work force.



“About three quarters of a mile upstream we diverted half of Cobalt Creek. See it flows through a ditch along the contours of the slope and ends up about a hundred yards up yonder....It flows into ... a three foot pipe and then flows down slope real steep. And then that narrows to a two-foot pipe. And then a one foot pipe. You see all the time that water's flowing downstream, it picks up speed. And it picks up force by going into the thinner pipes....By the time the water reaches the monitor, I've got about 200 pounds of pressure per square inch. I can blast that gravel out of that cliff and then it washes into the bed and then it travels right through the sluice.”

While looking at the land around her, Megan tells Josh, “It looks like hell.” But Josh is only interested in the product of the degradation: “You know I can get 20 tons of gravel a day in this river,” he says. Seconds later, while the audience watches hydraulic monitors shooting water at the cliffs above the Yuba River, in an obvious parallel to what is happening to the landscape, Josh attempts to rape Megan. Josh fails only because Preacher, Clint Eastwood's character, saves her.

This scene from *Pale Rider* introduces one of its most important themes: the exploitation of the environment and of those most connected to it. Although this theme is prevalent mining films like *How Green Was My Valley*, it is missing in any other Eastwood Western. In fact, *Pale Rider* is the only film directed by Eastwood that focuses on such an issue. *Pale Rider* not only examines how the environment can be exploited, it also takes the time to demonstrate a better way, an alternative to the absolute destruction of large scale corporate mining centered around the fact of hydraulic mining. Just as Preacher saves Megan, the individual miners, “tin pans,” can save the land from LaHood, the mining baron, and his environmentally devastating methods.

Pale Rider, however, not only problematizes corporate mining techniques, suggesting that the corporation

We see the mining and devastated landscape ...



... from Preacher's point of view.



He critically observes the erosion and ...



... falling trees.

Community mining practices

should be obliterated. It provides a viable solution to the consequences of hydraulic mining—individual tin panning in a cooperative community seeking to plant roots and raise families. In contrast to LaHood and his greed for gold, for individual miners like Hull Barret and Spider Conway, “Gold ain’t what [they’re] about” (*Pale Rider*). But the film goes further, offering a political solution to the environmental destruction threatened by hydraulic mining interests.

This solution in *Pale Rider* has not received any detailed examination. Extreme violence is the ultimate solution offered in *Pale Rider*, and while it is couched in mythological terms similar to *High Plains Drifter*, the inclusion of Hull Barret in the mayhem and killing keeps the environmental argument grounded in the here and now and provides for an alternative to the “progressive” model of the Western, as defined by Richard Slotkin. Instead, the resolution of *Pale Rider* harks back to *The Outlaw Josie Wales* (1976) where, according to Slotkin, Josie forgives his enemy with the claim,

“All of us died a little in that damn war”
(633).

It also prefigures the anti-revenge themes in Eastwood’s critically acclaimed *Unforgiven* (1992) and *Mystic River* (2003). Although violence does provide “regeneration” (Slotkin’s word) in *Pale Rider*, it ultimately serves both a working class community and the natural world that sustains it.

Brief history of hydraulic mining

According to Ken Huie, a park ranger in Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park,

“Hydraulic mining was born and raised here in California....And no matter what you think of the result, it was a tremendous engineering feat” (Keister).

Huie oversees a park in the Sierra Nevada mountain range where the topography wears the mark of hydraulic mining from the 1850s to the 1880s, a mining technique so effective it was used in areas all over the western United States. According to Edwin Kiester, Jr.,

“Hydraulic mining applied a simple method familiar to all who’ve used a garden hose.



Community miners work along their segment of a creekbed...



... panning gold by hand...



... and working side by side.

Direct a forceful stream of water at the earth, and it will carve a ditch and carry away loosened soil.”

To create a large scale mining system,

“Engineers built a network of reservoirs, lakes, ditches and flumes extending as far as 40 miles to catch every precious drop of rain or Sierra snowmelt. Propelled by gravity along a vertical drop of up to 500 feet, the captured waters converged into a single, powerful stream. Then they were fed into water cannons trained on the gold-bearing hillside” (Kiestner).

In Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park, these cannons are on display. Huie explains,

“A single monitor [water cannon] with an eight-inch nozzle like this could direct 16,000 gallons of water a minute....It could tear away 4000 cubic yards of earth from the hillside every day” (quoted in Kiestner).

And debris resulting from such destructive mining was dumped into the Yuba river, so tainted water flowed into the Feather River, the Sacramento and even San Francisco Bay (Kiestner). The Yuba River became so contaminated that

“The mine’s operator, North Bloomfield Gravel Mining, lost a lawsuit in January 1884 for polluting the Yuba River with tailings that caused massive floods in previous years” (Kiestner).

It seems self-evident, then, that hydraulic mining hurt not only the environment—the mountains bared by water—but also the economic welfare of those flooded out by the dammed rivers and streams.

In 1850, Edward G. Buffum, a member of the Seventh Regiment of the New York State Volunteers who spent six months in the gold mines, saw hydraulic mining as a way to provide such economic development,

“to offer to the oppressed and down-trodden of the whole world an asylum, and



Preacher helps Barret find
his gold nugget...

a place whereby honest industry, which will contribute as much to our wealthy as their prosperity; they can build themselves happy homes and live like freemen” (138).

According to Buffum, hydraulic mining offered

“an immense field for the investment of capital throughout the world, and for the employment of a large portion of its labouring [sic] population” (141).

[Continued: Big guys against little guys in *Pale Rider*](#)



... while women maintain
the homes.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Preacher in nature



Preacher, the angel, comes from nature...



... and allies himself with Barret...



... until he achieves his

Pale Rider's frequent binary: "big guys against little guys"

Such an attitude about nature, and about the environmental costs of mining, is also reflected by films of the Western genre where mining, especially mining by individuals, is romanticized and corporate mining like hydraulic mining is denigrated only if it interferes with the economic progress of the individual miner. Westerns like *Badlanders* (1958), *The Far Country* (1955) and *The Bend of the River* (1952), however, fail to examine environmental degradation accompanying corporate mining. Only the corporate barons' impact on the individual is called into question. *Pale Rider* places environmental concerns at the forefront, with a corporate baron agreeing with Buffum's argument about hydraulic mining's potential and an avenging angel agreeing with the park ranger's. The binary is established between the evil LaHood and the good Preacher, but Hull Barret and his community complicate and, perhaps, deconstruct the binary established between LaHood and Preacher by offering an alternative to both.

The opening to *Pale Rider* immediately establishes a classic binary between good and evil found in Westerns like *Shane*, where cattle barons resist the inclusion of small farmers into their open range, by contrasting the pristine forested Sawtooth Mountains with the thunderous riders, who disrupt the peace nature represents. Lennie Niehaus's score heightens the threatening effect of what we discover are LaHood's men, who aim to invade the small miners' village and drive them out.

The pounding of these riders is also contrasted with the laughter of the families in the village where small miners carefully pan for gold in the clear water of a stream. LaHood's riders disturb the tranquility of the small miners' village, destroying homes as they tear through, even going so far as to kill a cow and

vengeance.

Corporate interests clash with...



... the domestic world of Megan's family...



... and with the small miners and the natural world. That community and its harmony are represented by the mountains, stream, and villagers and their animals.



Megan's pet dog. LaHood's riders clash with the small miners and the natural world represented by the mountains, the stream and the village animals. But nature also serves as the space in which the avenging Preacher is summoned, when Megan Wheeler prays for a miracle over her dog's grave. The first few minutes of the film, then, set up good and evil elements in the film: the good stewards of nature — Preacher and the small miners — stand out against nature's destroyers — LaHood and his men.

Images of the clear stream nurturing the small miners are reinforced by the quiet tranquility, both visual and aural, of Carbon Canyon and by Hull Barret's attitude toward a large rock in the creek bed that he believes holds gold. According to Barret, "If I could split that rock there, there'd be gold underneath." But in spite of his faith in the rock's holdings, Barret chooses not to blow up the rock because of the degradation it would cause to the stream: "Well, I thought of drilling and blasting the son of a gun, but you know, uh, that would...," Barret begins. And Preacher finishes his thought, "That would wreck the stream, wouldn't it." Barret agrees, saying, "Yea, the stream would be dammed up....be the end of everything." Even though these small miners dig for gold, they refuse to destroy the stream in order to attain it, choosing instead to sustain nature so it can sustain them. In fact, the small miners continue gold panning instead of evolving to more "productive" but destructive techniques common in the 1850s like the two-man rocker, the two-man Long Tom or the sluice box ("Hydraulic Mining in California"). According to Richard Schickel,

"These peaceful souls are presented in the film almost as a hippie commune" (403).

Coy LaHood and his men, on the other hand, strip the earth of all of its wealth. Juxtaposed with scenes of Barret and Preacher hammering communally on the rock are images of a train bringing LaHood back from Sacramento, where he had sought to obtain control of the small miners' claims. The discussion Coy LaHood has with his son, Josh, and one of his gunmen, McGill, emphasizes their destructive mining techniques and their greed for gold at any cost. The corporate miners led by LaHood "play out" vein after vein of gold, in the "number five shaft" and "down in Cobalt Canyon" (*Pale Rider*). And, according to Josh LaHood, they "went another 20 foot down twelve

Megan and her dog before LaHood's raid on the village.



Megan summons an avenging angel.



Megan surveys the hydraulic cannons...



... and the damage they cause.

Community solidarity

shaft and pulled out nothin' but magnetite and shut her down." After excavating almost all of the gold on his own property, LaHood only wants more.

In a desperate search for more gold, wealth, and complete control, LaHood not only sends riders to intimidate the small miners and take over Carbon Canyon. He also tries (and fails) to intimidate legislators in Sacramento to sign over the small miners' claims. According to Coy LaHood, "Sacramento ain't worth moose piss" because, legislators there "didn't sign the writ." The scene does not stop with this blow to "the big guys." It also makes a blatant environmental statement when Coy LaHood exclaims, "Some of those bastard politicians want to do away with hydraulic mining altogether. Raping the land, they call it." (See Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* for further such examples.) Even LaHood realizes the consequences of governmental intervention in his mining business, but he responds from his own avaricious perspective:

"We've gotta move on Carbon and move fast, 'cause the way the wind's blowin', another couple of years, we may be out of business."

LaHood's greedy proclamations are contrasted with the small miners' cooperative stewardship of nature. After Preacher runs off Josh LaHood and his oversized lackey, Club, Barret and Preacher, with the help of other community members, finish splitting the big boulder on which they had been hammering, and later on Barret discovers a large gold nugget beneath it. Such a scene in most Westerns would provide the motivation for at least a spark of greed in the other miners, so they would invade Barret's rock in search for more gold. Instead, Barret shows his nugget to Preacher, to Sarah, his fiancée, and to Megan, her daughter and the four go to town to pay the community's debts. The other miners go on with their own mining efforts without much comment. Only Spider's sons respond, chasing the wagon and wishing they too could go to town. The four ounce gold nugget inspires a family outing, communal responsibility in the form of debt paying, and continued work, not greedy arguments and bloodshed. Later in the film, Spider's "payday come" (Barret). He finds a gold-filled stone as big as his head. But the community again shows no real emotional response, maintaining their labors but

among the small miners



Miners discuss LaHood's buyout offer.



It's his turn. Spider finds his gold nugget.



The gold nugget inspires a family celebration and...

demonstrating no feelings of greed. As Sarah puts it, it's "his turn." Spider and his sons, just like Barret, celebrate by going to town, even though their stone appears after LaHood dynamited the river and dammed up the communal stream.

The communal trust the small miners have established becomes most evident when they're discussing the \$1000.00 a claim LaHood offers them after a negotiation in his office with Preacher, as a last effort to legally seize Carbon Canyon before bringing in a gun-slinging mercenary and his deputies to kill Preacher and run the small miners out. Hull Barret intervenes when it sounds like the rest of the small miners wish to take the offer and avoid trouble:

"Startin fresh sounds good when you're in trouble. but before we, uh, vote, uh, and pack up and leave, I think we oughta ask ourselves why we're here. 'Cause if it's no more than money, then we're no better than LaHood himself....If any of us turned up \$1000.00 of nuggets, would he quit? Hell no. He'd build his family a better house and, uh, buy his kids better clothes. They'd build a school or a church. If we were farmers we'd be planting crops. If we raised cattle, we'd be tending them, but we're miners, so we dig and pan, and break our backs for gold, but gold ain't what we're about....I came out here to raise a family. This is my home. This is my dream. I sunk roots here."

Barret and the other small miners have built a community in Canyon Creek that they wish to maintain, so they need to sustain the creek and canyon that nourish. Barret sees small mining as a means to an end—building a family and a community with schools and churches—not as a quest for gold, money, and the power it represents.

Coy LaHood, on the other hand, hauls out as much gold as possible as quickly as he can for the money and power it provides. After failing to bribe Preacher with a town church and a full collection plate, LaHood defines his own mission, owning and controlling everything rather than joining a community of individuals with agency:

"I opened this country. I made this town what it is. I bought jobs and industry. I



built an empire with my own hands, and I've never asked help from anyone. Those squatters, Reverend, are standing in the way of progress."

.... communal responsibility in the form of debt paying, and continued work, not greedy arguments and bloodshed.

For LaHood, the land is meant to own and exploit, not to sustain for future family members:

"What's mine's mine, and if you make me fight for it, I will."

Coy LaHood sees himself as representing progress, but it's a destructive progress meant only for LaHood and his followers. Individual miners who sustain the environment are standing in the way of progress, are squatters who should be "run out" or paid off, so the canyon can be stripped of all of its wealth without delay. In fact, they must be destroyed, as Marshall Stockburn and his deputies destroy Spider and his gold stone when Spider and his sons come to town to celebrate their good luck.

Barret and the small miners, then, are clearly established as law-abiding, ethical, and community-minded (good) "little guys," and Coy LaHood and his followers counter them as evil corporate "big guys," who take what they want at any cost. This story, as Eastwood suggests, is nothing new for Westerns. The environmental message the film nearly shouts out, however, sets *Pale Rider* apart from all Eastwood directed films.

The film, then, endorses both community values associated with the small miners and sustainable development illustrated by their less invasive mining techniques. To do this, it first argues strongly against extreme mining techniques associated with a "fair use" philosophy that justifies exploiting all natural resources on one's own property. LaHood and his men follow a fair use philosophy, taking extreme measures to extract minerals quickly and without thought to maintaining the land for future generations. As a testament against extreme environmental exploitation, the film highlights the degradation caused by LaHood's hydraulic mining techniques with three focused scenes and two explanations of the process and its results: one from Hull Barret and one already mentioned from Josh



Barret accompanies Preacher to deal with LaHood and the hydraulic cannons. This duo in action represent a communal spirit which Preacher forged.

LaHood, the mining baron's son.

[Continued: Contemporary environmental message](#)

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images of hydraulic mining: a contemporary environmental message

Rape of Megan



Megan rides to Josh LaHood's camp to defy Preacher (who has rejected her love) and her mother.

The film's introduction to LaHood's mining camp provides the first demonstration of the consequences of hydraulic mining techniques. This scene shows viewers the procedure without explanation, emphasizing the power of water pressure coming from the hydraulic cannons (monitors). The scene begins with a long shot of these powerful streams of water and then, a few shots later, shows these torrents stripping the hillside of all life, with the blare of the rushing water reverberating everywhere. The scene establishes a new setting — LaHood's camp — but it also illustrates both the amount of water pressure the procedure creates and the environmental devastation this shooting water produces.



The audience watches hydraulic mining from Megan's POV.

The visual introduction to hydraulic mining is followed by the film's first explanation of the process, this time from the perspective of a small miner, Hull Barret in a discussion with Preacher. According to Barret, "Coy LaHood came up here in '54 or '55... [and was] the first man to strike it rich." Barret seems to have no objection to LaHood's luck, but Barret's tone changes when he talks about LaHood's current methods:

"Last couple of years he's been using them hydraulic monitors....blasts the place to hell."

Barret's description of the results of hydraulic mining are juxtaposed with images of the clear stream where the small miners work less intrusively, a stark contrast to the lifeless shots of the stripped hills in the previous scene. Barret's conversation with Preacher also reveals the small miners' legal right to Carbon Canyon, not LaHood's. Barret makes clear,

"The only way he can take this land legally is if we leave it."



As she surveys the process and its results, she says, "It looks like hell."



Josh LaHood drags Megan to his camp.



"Raping the land," as they call it in Sacramento, is narratively aligned with raping a woman.



LaHood's men leave their water cannons to watch the rape and cheer it on.



The destruction caused by LaHood's mining methods is introduced and explained thoroughly enough to reveal the film's not so subtle environmental message against extreme environmental exploitation, a message heightened by LaHood's greed for more land to exploit, ownership of Carbon Canyon.

The second scene showing viewers the effects of hydraulic mining occurs after the small miners have voted to reject LaHood's offer of \$1000.00 per claim. When Preacher rides into the hydraulic mining camp to pass the vote results on to LaHood, the film shows even more of the destruction caused by pressurized water shooting out of monitors. Instead of showing only soil stream off of the hillsides, after a long shot of the water shooting cannons similar to those in the introductory scene, the film lets us see trees falling off of the hillside along with the eroding earth. The scene also reveals the first clear sign LaHood receives from the small miners that his methods are failing. They reject his offer. Environmental degradation in LaHood's camp parallels the destruction he causes after he learns about the small miners' vote and blasts the creek, damming it up. The film here shows us immediately how devastating one blast can be, as the rippling creek dries up and narrows to one small stream of water.

Figurative and literal rape

The third and arguably most powerful scene set in LaHood's hydraulic mining camp provides us with images of the shooting monitors and their devastating consequences as well as a detailed explanation of the process, an engineering feat highlighted by the noise of the pressurized water in the background, a noise so loud Megan declares, "It hurts my ears." Here the audience watches the monitors from Megan's point of view, since she has ridden into camp and toward Josh LaHood to defy Preacher (who has rejected her love) and her mother. Megan's gaze aligns with her words: "It looks like hell." We have already recorded Josh's description of the hydraulic mining process, a description that highlights only the wealth it provides him and his father.

But "raping the land," as they called it in Sacramento, is lined up with raping a woman — Megan — in this scene. The parallels between the two "rapes" are underlined because LaHood's men leave their water cannons to watch the rape and cheer it on, just as they watched the rape of the landscape caused by those

While the land is being
“raped” ...



... miners watch ...

same cannons. So when Preacher rescues Megan by shooting first Josh's gun and then his hand, the film shows us what methods are needed to stop both the literal and the figurative rapes.

A solution to “fair use”: sustainable development and “monkey wrench” violence

The small miners' community and the environment it sustains cannot survive unless Preacher and the small miners resort to force. These scenes, then, demonstrate the film's first environmental argument—that extreme methods like hydraulic mining are too devastating to the environment and should be replaced by the more gentle methods of the small miners, who seek to sustain their canyon for future generations. But the film highlights the strength of the myth of sustainable development as an alternative to fair use techniques like hydraulic mining not only by illustrating the more positive results of panning in an undammed stream; it also offers a viable (if violent) way to eliminate corporate mining and the greedy baron controlling it.



... as Josh LaHood...

Here the film complicates the simple binary between good and evil prevalent in contemporary Westerns: In order to save the land and their community, Eastwood and the small miners' representative, Hull Barret, must visit on the corporation the same destruction as LaHood inflicted on the small miners and the environment a difference from *Shane*, where Shane eliminates Joe's participation in a fistfight. After LaHood's marshal and his deputies mutilate Spider (who had gone to town only with his sons), Preacher clarifies the small miners' mission:



... attacks Megan...

“A man alone is easy prey... Only by
standing together will you beat the
LaHoods of the world.”



... and pins her to the
ground.

The next morning when Preacher rides off to take on LaHood and his men alone, it seems that he's negating his claim about the need for community, but Barret accompanies him, representing the communal spirit Preacher had forged. As stewards, the small miners learn that they must protect themselves, their families, and the environment using any means possible, including violence. Preacher is loaded down with dynamite, so he and Barret are able to blow up LaHood's mining camp, the hydraulic mine's cannons,

Taking out the LaHood camp



Preacher is loaded down with dynamite



... but he does not act alone.



He and Barret blow up LaHood's camp, including the hydraulic mining cannons.



and its infrastructure, returning water to its source.

This last scene of LaHood's camp occurs at sunrise, before the workers have risen, so the cannons lie dormant, and the remaining hillside is uninjured. In this scene, no men are killed. They all escape from the blasted tents and out-buildings, but the mining operation is destroyed when Preacher and Barret finish their work. Since Preacher does not work alone, it seems that the small miners and Preacher stand together to beat LaHood until Barret picks up a stick of dynamite that Preacher drops, and Preacher chases Barret's horse away. Preacher explains,

"You're a good man, Barret. You take care of Sarah and the girl."

The suggestion here is that Preacher will destroy the marshal, his deputies, and LaHood without assistance, extracting the personal revenge to which the film has alluded since Preacher's arrival. Preacher has prepared for his confrontation with Marshal Stockburn. When Preacher arrives in town, his image seems to be superimposed on that of LaHood, since he is reflected in the window out of which LaHood peers. And the marshal seems stunned when he first recognizes Preacher and exclaims, "You!" It seems, then, that Preacher will kill off LaHood and his men as a sole gunman, an avenging angel seeking retribution for the wrongs Marshal Stockburn had committed.

Preacher easily kills Stockburn's deputies one by one in ghost style, able to appear and disappear at will—demonstrating his supernatural status. And he faces Marshal Stockburn in the street, in a showdown scene as old as western films. It appears, then, that Preacher has taken on LaHood and his gang without Barret and the community he represents. But after Preacher shoots the marshal in the same six places in which he'd been shot—and then one more time in the head—LaHood appears by his office window, this time with a Winchester rifle in hand. We see him from Barret's point of view. Barret has arrived on foot, and he kills LaHood. In this way, LaHood is killed by a human agent, Barret, the nominal leader of the sustainable community who represents its values: the community can't wait for the law to stop something this destructive. The Preacher is now on his horse and, looking at Barret, simply says with a smile, "Long walk." Barret replies with his own smile and a laconic,

They destroy the large scale corporate mining operation without killing anyone.

The final shoot out



Preacher shoots the marshal in the same six places in which he'd been shot—and then one more time in the head.



After Preacher shoots the marshal, LaHood appears in his office window with a Winchester rifle. We see LaHood from Barret's POV before Barret kills him.

“Yep.”

Pale Rider, then, argues for sustainable development as an alternative to extreme fair use methods like hydraulic mining in several ways. It demonstrates that hydraulic mining is wrong, moving beyond mere historical accuracy. It even shows us that the government in Sacramento is against it, so that when Coy LaHood tries to sway legislators and fails, he recognizes that he'll have to shut down his corporate mines in a couple of years. But when LaHood's reaction is to extract as much wealth as possible before he's put out of business, without thought to the environmental consequences, the film combines the elements of Eastwood's other Westerns with an environmental message. A Preacher, called from nature, must implement vigilante justice to stop LaHood's desperate devastation of the environment. Such a clear and strong environmental message deserves serious examination, especially since Eastwood “made a point of discussing the environmental subtext of *Pale Rider* with Todd McCarthy of *Variety*” (McGilligan 377) at the Cannes Film Festival where it was screened in 1985.

Thus like other western films, *Pale Rider* deals with a contemporary set of political problems by placing it into a particular past. In this case, Eastwood interrogates ecological devastation caused by fair use politics by placing a symbol of the problem, hydraulic mining, in its contemporary setting, the mid-1800s. And the film feeds off of the Man With No Name persona and employs the revenge theme from other Eastwood Westerns. A gun is also the best way to deal with political problems. Since the environment will be destroyed before politics can legally stop it—there is no functioning legal system in the town—it must be dealt with extra-legally through an avenging spirit who comes literally from nature to protect the community and the environment while gaining revenge on his murderers. Ultimately, *Pale Rider* makes a contemporary environmental argument against fair use and for sustainable development, an argument with continuing relevance in light of lawsuits in Montana over open-pit mining and the aftereffects of hydraulic mining and other destructive mining techniques like those using cyanide and arsenic to better extract minerals. [\(2\)](#)

The end of *Pale Rider* reinforces this argument. After Preacher and Barret destroy the corporate mining

camp and kill off all its leaders, unlike *High Plains Drifter* or *Unforgiven*, the Eastwood films to which *Pale Rider* is most often compared, the focus is placed not only on Eastwood's Man With No Name — Preacher — but also on the representatives of the small miners' community — Barret and Megan. Preacher does not ride off into a desolate desert after looking back on a town he had destroyed. Instead, Preacher, a representative of the natural world, rides off into the Sawtooth Mountains on his pale horse and disappears into the snow, a sign that he has returned to the natural world from which he had been summoned. Barret and Megan, on the other hand, ride back to their village, presumably prepared to build the school and church for which they strive.

The last message of the film centers on love and community, with Megan's declaration of love for Preacher and her proclamation that the whole community loves him, too. The revenge cycle has been completed, and vigilante justice has been achieved. Yet something new emerges in *Pale Rider*: a call to action that serves not only violent ends but also environmental conservation. When Barret kills LaHood, he also eradicates LaHood's fair use politics that destroy the environment that Barret and his community wish to sustain.

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Notes

1. Montana outlawed hydraulic mining in 1972. Montana's 1972 Constitution provides protection for the environment in Article IX, sections 1-4, especially. Section 1 states that "the state and each person shall maintain and improve a clean and healthful environment in Montana for present and future generations" and that "the legislature shall provide adequate remedies for protection of the environmental life support system." Section 2 centers on reclaiming "all lands disturbed by the taking of natural resources," and section 3 on water rights, where "the legislature shall provide for the administration, control, and regulation of water rights," so the amount of water required by hydraulic mining techniques would be all but impossible to acquire. Section 4 focuses on preserving state lands for "use and enjoyment by the people."

2. *Time Magazine* ran an article on September 25, 1995 documenting the presence of arsenic in old Montana and California mines. In Montana, Crown Butte is attempting to mine for gold under protest, "in spite of Crown Butte's promise not to harm the area surrounding the mines in their projected 10-15 year life-span." One of their opponents, "Jim Barrett, chairman of the anti-mine Beartooth Alliance" declared, "When [the company] gets the gold, they'll be gone, but we will be here tomorrow. We will suffer forever." However, the Crown Butte mining project was on federal lands outside Montana's control, and Crown Butte mining, as of 2002, has failed to acquire these lands. Legal battles are still in play regarding the use of cyanide to extract minerals in Montana, as well.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Cape Town Affair Right-wing noir, South African style

by [Joseph K. Heumann](#) and
[Robin L. Murray](#)



From *Pickup on South Street* to *Cape Town Affair*...



...replicating sets, dialogue, shots, and also ideology.



In 1967, long-time Fox director, Robert D. Webb went to South Africa (for 20th Century Fox International) to slavishly remake Samuel Fuller's *Pickup on South Street* (1953), this time titled *Cape Town Affair*. Webb literally transports *Pickup on South Street* to its new setting, crediting Samuel Fuller and Harold Medford for a script nearly recreated word for word and for characters and interior sets nearly duplicated except for two changes: a change in two characters' names, from Mo to Sam and from Tiger to Donkey and – most importantly – a move to late 1960s Cape Town, South Africa, that becomes concretized by a portrait of the late Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd on the walls of a police station and an intelligence agency's office.

The film is a natural to remake in this setting, not as a recontextualization but as a complete transposition not only of dialogue but ideology for several reasons: 20th Century Fox, *Pick Up On South Street*'s production company, produced the film for Killarney Studios, their South African subsidiary. The film in its original form reinforces anticommunist values, which, in South Africa, are equated with apartheid policies. And the film was produced and distributed to white-only audiences in South Africa who were growing more and more paranoid about communist-led Black insurrections, especially on South African borders. Unlike with most remakes, Webb and Fox did not recontextualize *Pick Up On South Street* when it remade it in 1967 because it did not need to change the film to fit its 1960s South African location.

In *Pickup on South Street* as Skip picks Candy's purse on the subway...



... he also unwittingly grabs espionage microfilm.



A parallel sequence provides...



... the initiating incident for *Cape Town Affair*.

Overview of Fuller's *Pickup on South Street*

Fuller's *Pickup on South Street*, set in New York City, fits the early 1950s milieu in which he sets the film, since it draws so strongly on the Cold War paranoia and fear of communist espionage. A synopsis of *Pickup on South Street* makes its relevance to the Cold War period clear: After some microfilm is picked out of a purse owned by pretty prostitute and unknowing messenger for the communists (Candy, played by Jean Peters), the FBI and the police collaborate to find the pickpocket, who turns out to have a record of three convictions (Skip, played by Richard Widmark). The authorities use a stoolie's (Mo's/Sam's, played by Thelma Ritter in the original) help and stop a communist espionage scheme. The pickpocket, Skip, and Candy eventually fall in love and help the FBI and police — especially Tiger (Murvyn Vye) catch the commies, a choice that cleans up Skip's record and gains him respect in Candy's eyes.

Samuel Fuller describes Skip as “[c]ompletely asocial..., an outsider who doesn't give a damn about the rest of the world” and Candy as “a good-looking, streetwise dame with a checkered past” (292). Fuller names the police officer working with the FBI, Captain Dan Tiger and portrays him as “the captain of the anti-pickpocket brigade who's trying to put Skip away for life” (292). But it's Moe, “a stoolie whose one goal is to save up enough money for a decent cemetery burial,” who states the theme of the film:

“What do I know about Commies? Nothing.
I know one thing: I just don't like them”
(*Pickup on South Street*).

Fuller's *Pickup* is his reworking of a Dwight Taylor script (with story credit), *Blaze of Glory* (1952) about “a woman lawyer [who] falls in love with a criminal she's defending in a murder trial” (Fuller 292). To avoid the long courtroom case, Fuller changed the characters and went “down a few rungs lower on the ladder of criminality” (Fuller 292). But Dwight Taylor's script also highlights drug trafficking (Gallafent 245) rather than communist spies, so changes to the Taylor script also reflect the 1946 amendment to the Motion Picture Production Code. “Particular Applications” of the Code “prohibit[ed] the kinds of content which, over the years, [had] caused trouble for the industry” (Balio

380). Changes in *Pickup* relate most directly to section I of these particulars, “Crimes Against the Law.”



In *Pickup on South Street*, Mo knows nothing about Commies except that she doesn't like them.

In his autobiography, however, Samuel Fuller does not mention the drug trafficking in the original script or problems of the Production Code (and he never mentions *Cape Town Affair*). Instead, he highlights the cold war milieu as the basis for the film's chief conflict between patriotic Americans and members of a communist spy ring, remarking on Klaus Fuchs, “the spy who operated from England, selling secrets on microfilm to the Soviet Union” (295). Fuller “wanted to take a poke at the idiocy of the cold war climate of the fifties” with *Pickup*, so the film was “told through the eyes of the powerless” (295). As Fuller put it,

“Cold war paranoia? Hell, those crooks were most interested in just getting by” (295).

A protagonist like Skip seems as reluctant a hero as the noir nihilists cited by Barbara Deming or even a psychotic like Alan Ladd's character in *This Gun for Hire*. Yet unlike the noir heroes whom Deming mentions, Skip is not incited to action by a femme fatale. He chooses “political” action to save (successfully) the woman he loves. Unlike Deming's heroes or Ladd's psychotic character, too, Skip wins. Only Moe loses her life as a result of the film's communist espionage plot.



Skip is “completely asocial, an outsider who doesn't give a damn about the rest of the world.”

Post WW2 anticommunist fervor and its impact on filmmaking

Anticommunist movies grew in number in the United States during the late 1940s and 1950s as a result of many historical events surrounding the Cold War—including Russia's development and testing of the A and H bombs, China going Communist, the Korean War, and House on Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigations, as well as the Senate (McCarthy) hearings. Fuller directed several films with anticommunist themes during the early 1950s, including *Steel Helmet*, a film he also wrote. The film examines the Korean War and its consequences from the perspective of an American sergeant (Gene Evans). Although the film has an overall anti-war theme, it also argues against the totalitarianism of Communist North Korea, where love between soldiers (like that between Short Round and Sergeant Zack) is “scoff[ed]” at (Garnham 114). Fuller also directed films with an anti-communist feel for 20th Century Fox: *Pickup on South*



Skip and Mo “just getting by” in *Pickup on South Street*...

Street, Fixed Bayonets and Hell and High Water.



... like Skip and Sam in
Cape Town Affair.



Sam lives alone in a small
poor room, as does her
counterpart Mo in the Fuller
film.



These close ups occur in
their respective films just
before each woman is killed
by Joey, the Red.

Twentieth Century Fox's *The Desert Fox*, for example, highlights the rehabilitation of the Nazi General Erwin Rommel. Twentieth Century Fox, like all Hollywood studios, had transformed itself in response to the 1948 Supreme Court ruling that prohibited studios from owning theatre chains and to "The House on Un-American Activities Committee hearings and the Hollywood blacklist" (Custin 309). Samuel Fuller's *Hell and High Water*, especially, seems to respond to Fox's political and social transformation, since the film speculates about communists' attempts to drop a nuclear bomb on their own side and start World War III. In the film, the communist Chinese attempt to fly an American warplane from a small Alaskan island to bomb North Korea. The film's anticommunist message is anything but subtle, but Fuller agreed to direct *Hell and High Water* as a "personal favor" to Zanuck (Fuller 307).

According to Fuller, he agreed to direct *Hell and High Water* after he and Zanuck had an altercation with J. Edgar Hoover regarding *Pickup on South Street*. Fuller recalls, "The FBI chief was very disturbed about *Pickup on South Street* and wanted to see Zanuck and me about it" (307). Hoover, according to Fuller, thought the film "had gone too far" (307). Yet when Hoover asked that "offending scenes" be "cut or reshot," Zanuck refused (according to Fuller) (308). Fuller then rewrote the script of *Hell and High Water* so it was merely "an adventure yarn" with a "stylized, cartoonish tale" (308), as well as a site for an experimental use of Cinema Scope in the interior of a submarine (313). Yet, as with *Pickup*, according to Fuller, leftist critics saw the film as "anticommunist propaganda" (313). Such an esoteric period in the United States in which a film like *Pickup on South Street* fits so well raises the question, why does Webb's remake of *Pickup*, *Cape Town Affair*, fit so comfortably into its new milieu, 1967 Cape Town, both visually and politically?

Anticommunist fervor and *Pickup on South Street*

Pickup on South Street, the 1953 Fuller film, works well in its urban 50s noir setting, with the Red scare and cold-war paranoia seeming to drive its fervor. But it also responds to the strictures of the Motion Picture



The plot of both films has Skip choose political action to save the woman he loves.



Skip lives in a shack by the river in both films. It has a trapdoor in the floor leading to the water.



In this way, Fuller's mise en scene allots Skip a dwelling beside the wharf, where he escapes like a water rat. *Cape Town Affair* uses the

Production Code against highlighting drug use and trafficking evident in the script on which the film was based. The amendment to the Code most relevant to Fuller's choice to replace drug traffic with communist espionage was added on September 11, 1946. It states, under "Particular Applications" of the Code,

"The illegal drug traffic must not be portrayed in such a way as to stimulate curiosity concerning the use of, or traffic in, such drugs; nor shall scenes be approved which show the use of illegal drugs, or their effects, in detail" (quoted in Balio 380).

Fuller, or the producers at Fox, seems to have changed the film to avoid trouble. According to Edward Gallafent, Robert Aldrich claims that "up to *The Man With the Golden Arm* (1955), drugs couldn't be mentioned in American films" (245) — two years after Fuller's *Pickup on South Street*.

Ironically, *Pickup on South Street* was distributed in France with significant changes soon after its 1953 release, even though it was not remade until 1967 — in South Africa. The French translation harked back to the plot of Taylor's original script and substituted drug trafficking for the communist espionage in Fuller's *Pickup*. According to Fuller, Georges Sadoul, whom Fuller claims was himself a communist, gave the film a negative review at the 1953 Venice Film Festival, seeing the film "as anticommunist propaganda" (304). In spite of the opinions of what Fuller calls "lefty critics" (304) the film won the Festival's Bronze Lion (Fuller 305).

Fuller claims that what he calls the "hullabaloo" at the Venice Film Festival intimidated the film's French distributor so much that "he retitled [the] movie as *Le Port de la Drogue — Port of Drugs* — changing the French-dubbed version so that, instead of microfilm destined for the communists, the pickpocket intercepts a drug shipment" (305). Fuller was outraged by the French distributor's changes to his film, exclaiming in his autobiography, "France! Where I thought the artist's work was revered, no matter his or her politics" (305). Although the film won a Bronze Lion at the 1953 Venice Film Festival, the president of the Venice Jury, Luchino Visconti, "opposed [Fuller's] winning the prize because of his own Communist convictions" (Fuller 306). But the French distributor's changes to both title and plot demonstrate that *Pickup on South Street*

setting to the same narrative ends and with the same emotional overtones.

could be translated and remade without any reference to communists, communism, or communist espionage whatsoever—something Fox and Robert Webb chose not to do in 1967 South Africa.

[Continued: *Cape Town Affair* and anticommunist fervor](#)

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The interior of Skip's shack in *Pickup on South Street*, where he lies in a hammock and drinks a beer.



The same mise-en-scene with the same connotations in *Cape Town Affair*.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Cape Town Affair, anticommunist fervor and apartheid politics



Hendrik Verwoerd's photograph, displayed prominently in key scenes, highlights the characters' anti-communist and pro-apartheid ideology.



Donkey and an intelligence agent work to break the Communist spy ring.

In spite of the few changes to the screenplay, *Cape Town Affair* fits just as well in an updated setting as *Pickup* did in 1953 New York. Such a good fit for a 50s Red scare film becomes possible in *Cape Town Affair* because of its South African setting and its foregrounding of the founder of the Afrikaner Republic, Hendrik Verwoerd, whose photograph prominently hangs in several of the Cape Town Police and Intelligence offices. For South Africans, Verwoerd's portrait signifies the anticommunist values espoused by Fuller's screenplay, since Verwoerd's Nationalist-led republic designed and constructed a program of Apartheid that was continuously threatened by communist-led resistance movements from its inception.

Verwoerd's assassination just prior to the film's release enhances his role as a heroic representative of the Afrikaner republic, a republic that maintained freedom for its white citizens only by oppressing black Africans and the communist party members and organizations that would help them protest against their program of Apartheid. Late 1960s South Africa, then, provides a perfect environment in which to drop a 1950s American anticommunist film. It also may provide ammunition for claims that Samuel Fuller—or at least Twentieth Century Fox Films—promoted a right-wing agenda in Fuller's 1950s films and for 1960s 20th Century Fox International films shot in South Africa.

The 1967 remake, *Cape Town Affair*, nearly literally transposes *Pickup on South Street*, word for word, even though the Cold War paranoia in the United States had by then (the 1960s) been replaced by other fears: Internally the U.S. grappled with issues associated with the Civil Rights Movement and externally with those stemming from the Vietnam War. Instead of “translating” the film for a more current cultural context, *Cape Town Affair* seems to recreate what in



Verwoerd's image seems to look over Sam's shoulder as she chooses a tie from her suitcase.

1967 would be dated characters and dialogue, at least in the United States. In fact, Webb even directs Claire Trevor, who plays Sam (Mo) to speak with a Brooklyn accent similar to that of the character in *Pickup*, and *Cape Town Affair*'s Skip (James Brolin) speaks with an accent as American as it is in *Pickup on South Street*. But in a South Africa driven by apartheid politics that denigrated communists and communism because of their association with the black national movement, 1950s "Red Scare" American politics like that reflected in *Pickup* work just as well in late 1960s Cape Town.

Twentieth Century Fox and apartheid

Tomaselli's *The Cinema of Apartheid: Race and Class in South African Film* illustrates the most powerful ramification of the anticommunist politics in *Cape Town Affair*: support for South African apartheid policies. According to Tomaselli, "Apartheid is a saleable commodity" (51). Although South Africa's Minister of Defense, General Magnus Malan, claimed that control of media was meant to limit "giving excessive and unjustified publicity to the terrorists and thus playing into their hands" (Tomaselli 20), this "siege mentality" actually translated into cinematic treatments promoting Afrikan values:

"Reality becomes a choice between binary opposites—good versus bad, war versus peace, Black versus White, communism versus nationalism, Christianity versus Marxism. Films which do not fit this framework may have their meaning inverted through censorship directives" (Tomaselli 20).

Tight censorship policies were enforced by the South African subsidy system put in place in 1956 "designed to limit the production of non-commercial films" (Tomaselli 30) and The 1963 Publications and Entertainments Act, which "for the first time made formal provision for the censorship of locally produced material" (Tomaselli 14). When 20th Century Fox International began its vertical monopoly in South Africa in 1956, it conformed to the country's pro-apartheid censorship policies until 1969, when,



Verwoerd's picture is framed by Donkey and Sam.



In contrast, *Pickup*'s images in the police station - here with Mo picking out a tie from her suitcase - do not have any kind of political imagery although...



... the scenes shot in the police station have a similar blocking and composition in both films.



In *Pickup on South Street*, Skip has hidden the microfilm at home and...



... later examines it, as does...

according to Silverman, the company had “an extraordinary gain of \$11 million (from the sale of some South African theater holdings)” (141). According to a footnote in the Silverman text,

“These were 80 theatres that Spyros Skouras had bought for the company in 1957, after the U.S. Justice Department prevented Hollywood studios from owning theatres in America. Other properties were purchased through Europe and England. The South African holdings proved to be sitting on valuable pieces of real estate, so they were sold back to their original owners, the Schlesinger Brothers. Fox had sustained a studio facility in South Africa where it made some CinemaScope spaghetti westerns starring George Montgomery. Hollywood unions opposed the Fox South African studio, less for reasons of Apartheid ... but because it posed a competitive threat.” (141)

Twentieth Century Fox was active in the white South African film industry from 1956 until 1969, and *Cape Town Affair* was one of the films produced in the South African Fox Killarney Studio. According to the 1964 *Moody's Industrial Manual*, Fox bought Schlesinger Entertainment, a South African company, in 1956. Fox then owned 100% of Fox Theatres South Africa, which consisted of 144 South African movie houses and a Twentieth Century Fox Investments PTY Ltd., South Africa, the subsidiary under which Schlesinger Entertainment was housed. according to “History of South African Film,” 20th Century Fox controlled much of South Africa’s white Afrikaner film industry through the 1950s and 1960s, when a regulated subsidy system was introduced “to keep South African cinema a cinema for Whites only” (*History of South African Film*). Some films could only be seen by whites, and white-only studios received the only governmental funding in South Africa until 1974 (Tomaselli 22). Most cinemas did not obtain multiracial status until 1986 (Tomaselli 22).

Cape Town Affair was one of the films Fox produced in South Africa during its most fervent Nationalist period and reflects the politics of Apartheid created and enforced by Hendrik Verwoerd, the founder of the



... his counterpart in *Cape Town Affair*.



Claire Trevor/Sam speaks with a Brooklyn accent similar to her counterpart Mo in *Pickup*, and *Cape Town Affair*'s Skip/James Brolin speaks with an accent as American as Fuller's Skip.



In the police station, again framed by Verwoerd's picture, Skip and Donkey "discuss" Skip's willingness to work for South Africa.

Nationalist movement. The republic Verwoerd established in 1960 enhanced governmental control of the cinema, since Afrikaner nationals now held even more power in the South African parliament. According to Botha, "Ideology and capital came together to create a national cinema that would reflect South Africa during the Verwoerdian regime." Verwoerd's and the Afrikaners' South Africa promoted apartheid and opposed any elements they saw as hindering apartheid policies, especially communism. These ideals were concretized in Afrikaner films and in film's Fox produced for the white Nationalists, where "idealistic conservatism was characterized by an attachment to the past, to ideals of linguistic and racial purity and to religious and moral norms" (Botha).

By the 1960s, the Afrikaner Nationalists led by Hendrik Verwoerd sought to "explain how the communists ... undermine[d] the South African way of life" (Harrison 206). Communists were seen as a threat to Apartheid and to Afrikaner rule because they supported Bantu uprisings and anti-apartheid protests. The communists, then, became the target for Nationalists like Verwoerd, because they endangered the creation and maintenance of an Afrikaner-led republic in South Africa. The *South African Yearbook* from 1975 provides evidence for the anticommunist policies of the 1960s. *Cape Town Affair* serves as a film where these politics are illustrated through the same anticommunist zeal the Red scare produced in the United States during the 1950s—and in films like *Pickup on South Street*.

The multiple photographs of Hendrik Verwoerd placed in the settings of *Cape Town Affair* carry added weight because Verwoerd symbolizes Apartheid, the Nationalist movement, and its anticommunist policies. We see Verwoerd's portrait reframed in the context of Fuller's and, to a certain extent, Medford's dialogue in five major scenes of the film:

1. a discussion in the police station between police officers,
2. a negotiation between Sam (Mo) and the same police officers,
3. a confrontation between the police officers and Skip,
4. a meeting between Candy and the police officers about Skip, and
5. a consultation in the Intelligence Office.

The photograph is displayed prominently in these key scenes as a way to frame characters and their dialogue

and highlight the characters' anticommunist and, with Verwoerd's approval, pro-apartheid ideology.



With Verwoerd's image behind him, Donkey attempts to talk Skip into "coming clean with the microfilm."



Rejecting any discussion of national interest, in *Pickup on South Street*, Skip explicitly tells the Federal agent, "Don't wave that flag at me."

Verwoerd was active in the Afrikaner Nationalist movement from the 1940s, as part of the Nationalist Cabinet (Harrison 155) until his rise to Prime Minister in 1960. Verwoerd's ultimate goal to eradicate British rule and establish a republic ruled by Afrikaners outside of the Commonwealth began in 1948 and proved successful once the Afrikaners had a majority in the South African Parliament. According to Harrison, South Africa removed "Coloureds" from the common roll in 1956 and reduced the Senate to 54 members in 1960 (Harrison 158). 1960 was also the year Verwoerd announced, on January 20, that he proposed to hold a referendum on whether or not South Africa should become a republic, just sixteen months after he took office (Harrison 160).

With a parliamentary majority and an Afrikaner Prime Minister, Harrison suggests that the referendum vote still was difficult to predict (160), but on March 21, 1960, an incident occurred at Sharpeville that reassured Verwoerd and the rest of the Nationalists (Harrison 163). When a crowd of 15 to 20 thousand, mostly Blacks, gathered outside the Sharpeville police station, police opened fire without orders, killed 67 Africans and wounded 178, many of whom were shot in the back (Harrison 163). More shootings occurred in Lanza in Cape Town after protestors rioted, so Verwoerd introduced legislation making both the Pan African Congress and the African National Congress illegal and instituted a state of emergency (Harrison 163-64). Verwoerd escaped an assassination attempt soon after the riot, and 12,000 Black protestors were detained in pre-dawn arrests. From then on Afrikaners saw Verwoerd as a hero for the Republic (Harrison 164-65).

[Continued: Verwoerd and Cape Town Affair.](#)

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Verwoerd and *Cape Town Affair*



In *Cape Town Affair*, African art is everywhere in the Communist settings, even though no black African characters appear there.



Stylistically, *Cape Town Affair* is similar to *Pickup on South Street* in depicting its characters primarily in working class milieux.

On September 6, 1966, Verwoerd was assassinated (*South Africa 1975* 60). In 1967, the same year *Cape Town Affair* was released, according to *South Africa 1975*,

“the threat of terrorist activity on the borders of Angola, Mozambique and Rhodesia created a need for renewed vigilance on the part of the South African Police” (61).

Originally entitled *Escape Route Cape Town*, *Cape Town Affair* supported the ideology of the border films that resulted from this anti-apartheid terrorist activity and supported Verwoerd’s vision of a white republic.

After his assassination, Hendrik Verwoerd became even more of an icon of the Afrikaner Nationalist republic, so his portrait represents both the man, Verwoerd, and his vision, a pro-apartheid republic. In *Cape Town Affair*, Verwoerd literally looks over the whole pro-apartheid/anticommunist project as if endorsing it. The film frames the portrait not only visually but through the characters’ dialogue, enhancing the mission Verwoerd’s image symbolizes. Audience members can’t miss Verwoerd’s portrait on the walls of several settings in the film, and since in 1967, they would be predominantly Afrikaner, they would not miss the values he represents. *Cape Town Affair*, then, frames its argument by attaching it to a portrait, in this case of the icon of the South African Republic, Hendrik Verwoerd.

The first key scene highlighting Donkey (Tiger in *Pickup*), the Police Officer in charge, the national security agent captain, and Sam shows us Verwoerd’s photograph hanging on the wall beside the door of Donkey’s office. When the national security agent enters the scene, Verwoerd’s photograph seems almost superimposed onto the agent’s face, as if Verwoerd’s wisdom drives the agent’s search for communist



In the *Cape Town* version, Joey, the Red's apartment is prominently decorated with African works of art.



Candy is loyal to Joey until she realizes that he is a communist.



Candy realizes she is the dupe of a Communist spy ring. Visually, the Communists' office in *Cape Town Affair* and...

espionage. Verwoerd seems to watch from the photograph when Sam walks into the office and goes by the photo, as well, but the photo image is darkly lit before Sam knows about communist connections with the microfilm lifted from Candy's purse—this time on a double-decker bus instead of a subway, as in the original.

The photograph again is displayed prominently in the first scene in which Donkey and the captain confront Skip about the microfilm he has lifted. Again in Donkey's office, the photo seems to look over Donkey's shoulder as Donkey questions Skip about the microfilm before the captain enters to reinforce the national security problems the microfilm might cause. The photograph seems to legitimize anticommunist and, consequently, pro-apartheid leanings, since it acts like a dominant figure that cannot be hidden. It appears between Skip and Donkey early in the scene, facilitating Donkey's questioning, and then serves as the right side of a frame for Skip after the captain enters and makes a plea for Skip to act on his patriotism—"Just as we were going to grab a top red agent, you showed up," the captain argues, and, just like in *Pickup*, Skip tells the captain and Donkey to "save that patriotic flag waving." Both Skips only see a payday from the microfilm.

In the third key scene foregrounding Verwoerd's photograph, Candy, Donkey and the Captain frame Verwoerd's photo. Verwoerd's picture is not haphazardly placed in Donkey's office. It remains prominent, like a figure of Washington or Lincoln in the background of a governmental office in the United States. The position of Verwoerd's photograph makes him seem like a fourth person in the room, especially since none of the other characters block it. They may cross the photo, but they never stop in front of it for very long. Verwoerd, then, seems to look on as the governmental official asks Candy for help: "You do want to help us fight communism, don't you?" he exclaims.

And Verwoerd reinforces the nationalism behind Donkey's remarks about Skip, whom they know holds the microfilm: "There's a lot of difference between a traitor and a pickpocket," he says, suggesting that low level criminals like Skip still hold the same nationalist



... in *Pickup on South Street*. are strikingly similar, especially in mise en scene, with its connotation of "wealth." The luxurious standard of living enjoyed by the Communists is in stark contrast to Skip's.



The Communist spy in *Pickup on South Street*, seems wealthy, as does...



... his counterpart in *Cape Town Affair*, here cast to reflect "red scare" fears of Communist China.

anticommunist and pro-apartheid ideals as he and the captain, especially since Skip is white and of Western European stock. The Afrikaner nationalist ideology represented by Verwoerd is most strongly emphasized in the intelligence office where another print of the same photograph is on display. There Verwoerd looks on as the top Intelligence Agent speaks to Donkey, the captain and several other intelligence officers, solidifying their plans to end a communist espionage ring. There are three shots in this brief scene, but all three of these shots include the photograph of Verwoerd as a centerpiece, as the foci behind their agenda. Unlike the original *Pickup on South Street*, then, images on display serve as representations of characters' ideology. The original *Pickup* instead emphasized a seedy underworld devoid of artwork and representative wall hangings.

In *Cape Town Affair* this use of framed wall hangings as props demonstrating ideology occurs not only in governmental offices but also in several characters' apartments, where artwork displayed on walls and on tables as sculptures highlights the two opposing views in the film: patriotic Afrikaner nationalism stimulating anticommunist and pro-apartheid policies versus communist espionage encouraging the erasure of Afrikaner independence and apartheid policies. Although no photographs of Verwoerd hang in Skip's shack and Sam's and Candy's apartments, in a South African environment, neither do any examples of African art. In fact, the Cape Town presented in the film seems devoid of black faces, accept for a brief glimpse of a nanny and a couple of black African figures in a brief scene.

Sam's apartment, for example, where Joey "the red" confronts Sam for information about Skip's location, looks similar to Mo's in *Pickup on South Street*, more like a Brooklyn walk up than an African home. Sam's words come straight out of *Pickup*, as well, and are spoken in a similar Brooklyn accent:

"I happen to know what you're after. You commies are after some film that doesn't belong to you. What else do I know about commies? Nothing except I don't like 'em."

She explains this before Joey shoots her because she refuses to reveal Skip's location. Skip's shack is decorated with pinups and harbor scenes, again with no African art, and Candy's apartment walls are

bedecked with Japanese textiles and water colors, not African figures. Representative art was carefully planned in each of the film's settings.



In the intelligence service office, Verwoerd looks on as the top Intelligence Agent speaks to Donkey, the captain and several other intelligence officers, solidifying their plans to end a communist espionage ring.

Because of this careful planning and, especially, highlighting of Verwoerd's photograph in settings foregrounding nationalists, the use of African art in scenes centering on communist characters gains meaning. In both Joey's apartment and the communist leaders' office, African art highlights the anti-apartheid, pro-black nationalist beliefs of the communist characters interacting there. Joey's apartment, especially, places African art at the fore. When Candy calls on Joey to discuss the microfilm taken from her purse, we see statuettes and paintings of black African figures throughout the space. As Candy and Joey talk, we see an African statue behind him and a painting of African figures to his left. Another African figure in statue form stands to the left of Candy. A black and white African image hangs beside the closet door. An African mask and spear hangs on the wall beside the exit door to the apartment and between Candy and Joey, and an African textile hangs on the other side of the door serving as the rest of a frame that prominently displays Joey's black African sympathies.



Various South African agents collaborate with Verwoerd's symbolic approval.

More African art can be seen during the second scene shot in Joey's apartment. In this scene where Candy confronts Joey about the microfilm after Skip refuses to return it, Joey and Candy frame an African statue, and Joey is framed by two African art pieces on the wall: an African figure and a landscape. And when the two go to Joey's boss's office, African art again highlights their anti-apartheid and pro-African nationalist ideals. Here a statue of an African figure stands on the communist leader's desk. African art and textiles hang on the wall to the left of Candy and behind the couch where Joey sits. An African statue seems to look up at the communist chief. African art seems to be everywhere in these two communist settings, even though no actual black African characters are in the scenes. The only non-European communist is in fact an Asian, who makes the demand, "delivery [of the film] must be made tomorrow night."

The anticommunist South African officials, then, are distinguished from the communists in ways that highlight their views on apartheid and the two distinctive nationalist movements—the Afrikaners' and the black Africans'. As in *Pickup on South Street*, communism and communists are depicted as worse



This image of a nanny from the chase scene is the one African image in *Cape Town Affair*.



In both films, Skip's only motivation is his love for Candy. Here he visits her in the hospital, as he does...



... in *Pickup on South Street*.

than low level crime and criminals like Skip, Sam and Candy. But *Cape Town Affair* takes anti-communism one step further in this South African setting, since communism for white South Africans meant Black African insurrections, the end of Apartheid policies, and the loss of white control of the nation and its government.

Propaganda films like *Cape Town Affair* worked for their white South African audiences because they supported white independence and control of an African nation. When Skip and Sam talk in the tea house about giving up the microfilm, the power of that Afrikaner nationalist ideology becomes clear. Skip asks Sam, "Are you waving the flag, too?" And Sam replies, "Even in our crummy business you gotta draw the line somewhere," a line Sam draws with Joey to her death and that eventually Skip draws, even if mainly to gain Candy's respect. The communist espionage ring is thwarted, since they don't get away with the microfilm and whatever secrets it contains. But ultimately what the film reinforces is Apartheid and the White Afrikaner dominated South Africa it allows.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Ritwik Ghatak constructs detailed visual and aural commentaries of Bengal in the socially and politically tumultuous period from the late 1940s to the early 1970s. Here seen in his last, semi-autobiographical film, *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo / Arguments and a Story* (1974).

Ghatak's theme: the 1947 partition of India and its profound after-effects



Pakistan was composed of

“Woman” and “homeland” in Ritwik Ghatak’s films: Constructing post- Independence Bengali cultural identity

by [Erin O'Donnell](#)

The Bengali filmmaker, Ritwik Ghatak, was born in Dhaka in 1925, and lived in East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) throughout his adolescence.[1] [[open notes in new window](#)] The Bengal Famine of 1943-44, World War II and finally, the Partition of 1947 compelled Ghatak to move to Calcutta[2] where he became actively involved in the Indian People's Theater Association (IPTA) and the Communist Party of India (CPI).[3] Formed in 1943, IPTA was the first organized national theater movement in India that developed and performed plays addressing social injustice and British imperialism. Ghatak began working with West Bengal's IPTA wing in Calcutta in 1948, writing, directing and acting in his own plays, such as *Jwala* (“Flame,” 1951) and *Dalil* (“Document,” 1952). He acted in other plays, such as revivals of Bijan Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* (“New Harvest,” 1944) and Dinabandhu Mitra's *Neeldarpan* (“Indigo Mirror,” 1860), and adaptations of Gogol's *The Government Inspector* and Gorky's *The Lower Depths*. [4]

In 1951, Ghatak was commissioned by the Provincial Draft Preparatory Committee of IPTA to draft a document that would articulate the political and cultural ideology of IPTA in West Bengal. In his 1954 thesis *On The Cultural Front*, Ghatak outlined a cultural future (in ideological and organizational terms) for West Bengal's IPTA in particular and the CPI in general.[5] In 1996, I edited this document. It had been stored in the Communist Party office in Calcutta until that year, when it was given to the

two geographically separate (over 1,250 miles apart) and culturally, linguistically different parts: West Pakistan—now known as simply Pakistan—and East Pakistan—now known as Bangladesh. Note location of Calcutta.



Bengal was physically rent apart—by the 1947 Partition, engendered by the departing British colonizers, and by the Bangladeshi War of Independence in 1971. Here, a map of the 1947 Partition of Bengal.



The final scene of Nemai Ghosh's *Chinnamul*, a saga about Bengali farmers forced to move to Calcutta because of Partition. Ghatak's first film acting

Ritwik Memorial Trust, which has been systematically restoring Ghatak's films and republishing his writings and screenplays over the last two decades.

Because of many of the views Ghatak articulates in this document, and due to a “smear” campaign initiated against him by certain members of the CPI and documented in *On The Cultural Front*, he was forced to leave IPTA in 1954. He was removed from the membership rolls of the Communist Party in 1955. His dismissal letter is reprinted in *On The Cultural Front*. However, Ghatak has claimed that he willingly left IPTA and that he was never a CPI “card-carrying” member. As early as 1944 with the initial staging of *Nabanna*, the Bengal IPTA members disagreed about the organization's political and cultural trajectory, which echoed dissension in the CPI at large.[6]

Besides working with IPTA in the 1950s, Ghatak became active in filmmaking. Beginning in 1948, Ghatak and other aspiring Bengali filmmakers, like Mrinal Sen, began to meet to discuss films and filmmaking at a teashop in Calcutta called Paradise Cafe.[7] Ghatak led members of the group to organize a trade union for the underpaid studio workers and technicians in Calcutta.[8] One of Ghatak's first intensive involvements with cinema was as an actor in Nemai Ghosh's 1950 Bengali film, *Chinnamul* (“The Uprooted”). This film is pivotal in the development of Bengali cinematic realism and relates the story of a group of farmers from East Bengal who are forced to migrate to Calcutta because of Partition. Supported by IPTA, *Chinnamul* used Calcutta's Sealdah railway station as a location and actual refugees as characters and extras. That station had political importance as a site where thousands of refugees entered the city during and after Partition.

In 1952, a catalytic cinematic event for all of the emerging Bengali filmmakers, including Ghatak, Ray and Sen, occurred when the first International Film Festival was held in four Indian cities, including Calcutta. At this festival, Indian audiences first viewed Italian neo-realist films like De Sica's “Bicycle Thieves” and Japanese films such as Kurosawa's “Rashomon.” Also in 1952, Ghatak produced and directed his first feature film entitled, *Nagarik* (“The Citizen”). He completed eight feature films and ten documentaries before his death in 1976. [9]

In his films, Ghatak constructs detailed visual and aural commentaries of Bengal (located in northeast India) in the socially and politically tumultuous period from the

role was in this landmark of Bengali cinematic realism.



“In *Komal Gandhar* [E-Flat], I had to face the problem of operating at different levels. I wanted to draw simultaneously on Anasuya’s [the heroine’s] divided mind, the divided leadership of the People’s Theatre movement of Bengal [members pictured above in the film], and the pain of divided Bengal....”



...“On the soundtrack [of *Komal Gandhar*], I brought together words and tunes that are more than a century old When going to her husband’s place, Shakuntala [heroine as Shakuntala pictured above] had to tear herself away from her ashram, her very familiar world, the land

late 1940s to the early 1970s. Twice during his lifetime Bengal was physically rent apart—in 1947 by the Partition engendered by the departing British colonizers and in 1971 by the Bangladeshi War of Independence.[10] In his work, Ghatak critically addresses and questions—from the personal to the national level—the identity of post-Independence Bengal. The formation of East Pakistan in 1947 and Bangladesh in 1971 motivated Ghatak to seek through his films the cultural identity of Bengal in the midst of these new political divisions and physical boundaries.

Ghatak was an important actor in and commentator upon Bengali culture. His films represent an influential and decidedly unique viewpoint of post-Independence Bengal. Unique, because in his films he pointedly explored the fallout of the 1947 Partition of India on Bengali society, and influential, because his films set a standard for newly-emerging “alternative” or “parallel” cinema directors — in contrast to those directors who opted for the hegemonic “Bollywood” or Bombay style(s) of Indian cinema.[11] The majority of Ghatak’s films are narratives that focus on the post-Independence Bengali family and community, with a sustained critique of the emerging petite-bourgeoisie in Bengal, specifically in the urban environment of Calcutta. In this context, Ghatak utilizes a melodramatic style and mode novel to Indian cinema. His melodrama combines popular and classical idioms of performance from Bengal and India that are merged with Stanislavskian acting and Brechtian theatrical techniques.

In this paper, I will examine the relations between three interconnected elements in Ghatak’s film narratives:

- women
- landscape (exterior and interior)
- sound and music.

In his films, Ghatak consistently layers these three components to convey both utopian and dystopian visions of “Homeland” in an independent Bengal. He employs Bengali folk music and frames Bengali landscapes to inform, both aurally and visually, his representations of Bengali women as symbolic images of the joy, sorrow and nostalgia that he associates with the birth of the Indian state. I will analyze scenes from two of Ghatak’s films, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (A Cloud-Covered Star, 1960), and *Subarnarekha* (The Golden Line, 1962; also the name of a river in what is now Bangladesh) to illustrate this critical relationship between women, landscape, and sound and music which is fundamental to his construction of a

where she had lived from the day of her birth. The heroine of the film is the Shakuntala of Bengal, while the hero reflects on the burning discontent of today's youth. -- Ritwik Ghatak, Chitrabikshan, 1975



In *Komal Gandhar*, the hero and heroine look to their homeland, the former East Bengal.

Images from *Meghe Dhaka Tara / A Cloud Covered Star*



The heroine Nita appears for the first time, both in and of the Bengali landscape.

“resistant” narrative of the new Indian nation.[12] First, some brief background information about the 1947 Partition of India and Ghatak’s melodramatic style is necessary in order to contextualize Ghatak’s representations of “Woman” and “Homeland” and begin to understand how these representations are linked together in his films *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha*.

1947: Partition of India

In August 1947, after over a year of tortuous negotiations in the midst of communal (religious) riots and killings throughout India, leaders and representatives of the departing British colonial government, the predominantly Hindu Indian Congress Party and the Muslim League decided to divide India into the Indian Union, with a Hindu majority, and Pakistan, with a Muslim majority. Furthermore, Pakistan was composed of two geographically separate (more than 1,250 miles apart) and culturally, linguistically different parts: West Pakistan (now known as simply Pakistan) and East Pakistan (now known as Bangladesh). [See map.] Consequently, Bengal was also geographically and culturally divided into two parts: East Bengal became Pakistani East Bengal or East Pakistan and West Bengal became Indian West Bengal. [See map.]

An estimated ten million people, primarily Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, were forced over the next months to abandon the homes that they had lived in for generations and to migrate. Muslims fled to West and East Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs to India. Families were divided, friends and neighbors were left behind, and an immense mass confusion developed as to where to go and what to expect when they got there. All of these factors created tremendous tension which led to the religious hatred, riots and murders that ushered in India’s independence from Britain and the birth of Pakistan. Ghatak viewed the division of his native Bengal as mishandled and ill-conceived. Government officials, he believed, gave barely a thought to the devastating impact that such a division would (and did) have on millions of people. Ghatak spent his entire artistic life wrestling with the consequences of Partition: particularly the insecurity and anxiety engendered by the homelessness of the refugees of Bengal.[13] In his films, he tries to convey how Partition struck at the roots of Bengali culture. He seeks to express the nostalgia and yearning that many Bengalis’ have for their pre-Partition way of life.[14]



Nita listens to her unemployed brother Shankar sing. Her small income as a teacher provides her family's only financial support.

Ghatak was outspoken concerning India's Independence and Partition. In response to an interviewer's question regarding what personal truth had inspired his films, stories and plays, Ghatak replied:

"Being a Bengali from East Bengal, I have seen the untold miseries inflicted on my people in the name of independence—which is a fake and a sham. I have reacted violently towards this and I have tried to portray different aspects of this [in my films]."[15]

In another interview, Ghatak discussed the common thread of union in his films, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (*The Gandhar Sublime*, 1961; in the Indian classical musical system, an E-flat or flatted third), and *Subarnarekha* (1962). He stated:

"Against my intention the films *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar*, and *Subarnarekha* formed my trilogy. When I started *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, I never spoke of political unification. Even now I don't think of it because history will not alter and I won't venture to do this impossible task. The cultural segregation caused by politics and economics was a thing to which I never reconciled myself as I always thought in terms of cultural integration. This very theme of cultural integration forms the theme in all three films."[16]



Nita's mother is a destructive force. She is worried that Nita will marry and leave the family penniless.

In his films, Ghatak often situates his preoccupation with the union of East Pakistan and West Bengal within the heart of Bengali society: the family. And through the post-Independence Bengali "family," Ghatak expresses the radical transformations that occurred within Bengali culture. Ghatak's "families" are often not the traditional extended Bengali family, but "alternative," "surrogate" families, like the theatrical troupe in *Komal Gandhar* or the wandering group of misfits in *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo* (*Arguments and a Story*, 1974), who are displaced, urban, lower middle class refugees searching for a home. By utilizing a melodramatic style comprised of Bengali, Indian, European and Russian elements, Ghatak visually and aurally articulates a new Bengali homeland.

[Continued: Ghatak and Indian melodrama](#)



Nita's mother and father argue about her future.



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"Tell your father you owe us
for two months," the grocer
complains to Nita.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Indian melodrama: Ghatak's melodramatic style



Nita's sister, the seductive
Gita.



The coquettish and
conniving Gita ...



... brings a letter to Nita ...

Tracing the development of melodrama as a mode, genre and/or style in Indian, specifically Bengali, literature, theater and cinema is obviously beyond the scope of this paper.[17] [[open notes in new window](#)] Ghatak utilizes melodrama primarily as a style or mode rather than a coherently developed genre. He constructs his melodramatic style within the general Indian popular cinematic context of the 1940s and 1950s Hindi “social” films of directors like Guru Dutt and Raj Kapoor and the specific, regional context of 1950s and 1960s Bengali neo-realist “art” films of directors like Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen.[18] In an attempt to refine the definition of “melodrama” in relation to “realism” in the context of Indian cinema, the Indian film scholar Ravi Vasudevan explains:

“The conceptual separation of melodrama from realism which occurred through the formation of bourgeois canons of high art in late nineteenth century Europe and America was echoed in the discourses on popular commercial cinema of late 1940s and 1950s India. This strand of criticism, associated with the formation of the art cinema in Bengal, could not comprehend the peculiarities of a form (i.e., melodrama) which had its own complex mechanisms of articulation. In the process, the critics contributed to an obfuscating hierarchization of culture with which we are still contending.”[19]

Vasudevan’s observation is significant for Ghatak’s work because as a filmmaker who unabashedly employs a melodrama modality that combined maudlin and Marxist elements, Ghatak often stands in a cinematic space *in between* the popular cinema of Bombay and the art cinema of Bengal.

The Indian cinema scholar Ashish Rajadhyaksha helps to further situate Ghatak’s films within melodrama in the

Bengali cinematic context:



... which Nita takes to her room to read. These words of love from Sanat give her great pleasure until ...



... Shankar enters and playfully snatches the letter from her...



... illustrating how Nita's life is not her own.

“In Bengal, where a cinema had developed which was economically strong but culturally subservient to the novel, melodrama acquired an oppositional force, e.g. in Barua’s work which subverted the literary, and in the Kallol filmmakers where it later found new alignments with the IPTA’s formal emphasis on the folk theatre.”[20]

For Rajadhyaksha, after the nihilistic love stories of Bengali-Hindi director and actor P.C. Barua in the 1930s-40s, and the socially conscious, folk-infused plots of the Kallol and IPTA filmmakers in the 1930s-50s, Ghatak’s narratives are a next step in the evolution of melodrama in Bengali cinema.[21] As we will see later, scholars who have written on Ghatak, like Geeta Kapur, the Indian cultural critic, and Kumar Shahani, an Indian filmmaker and former Ghatak student, perceive Ghatak’s films as daring to push the boundaries of melodramatic modality. [22]

Throughout his essays and interviews, Ghatak discusses how he interweaves material from Indian mythology and Upanishadic, Marxist and Jungian philosophy into a melodramatic narrative form.[23] He deliberately uses coincidence and repetition to educate an audience and to express ideas. In Ghatak’s 1963 article, “Film and I,” he writes that melodrama is a “much abused genre,” from which a “truly national cinema” will emerge when “truly serious and considerate artists bring the pressure of their entire intellect upon it.”[24] In a 1974 interview, he states:

“I am not afraid of melodrama. To use melodrama is one’s birthright, it is a form.”[25]

Ghatak largely developed his melodramatic style of cinema when he was a playwright, actor and director during the 1940s and 1950s in IPTA. The variety of both indigenous and foreign theatrical styles that IPTA incorporated — such as the Bengali folk form, *jatra*, and Brecht’s “epic” form — greatly contributed to the theatrical shape of Ghatak’s melodramatic style.[26] Ghatak’s films are frequently characterized as “epic”; he often inverts and recontextualizes Indian traditions and myths.[27] He described Indians as an “epic-minded people” who liked to be told the same myths and legends again and again, and he viewed this “epic attitude” as a



Gita tells her mother she has to have a sari.



Montu, Nita's younger brother, tells his mother he needs football gear.



In the background, Nita arrives with her paycheck, and Gita and Montu clamor for money around her. In the foreground, her disgruntled mother anxiously waits for her share.

“living tradition.”[28] In the following sections on *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha*, I will give examples of Ghatak's deconstruction of traditional mythologies surrounding the Bengali woman, and his insertion of reconstructed representations into a modern context to critique *his* present historical moment.[29]

In the 1960s, Ghatak translated Brecht's *The Life of Galileo* and *Caucasian Chalk Circle* from English to Bengali. In numerous essays and interviews, he discusses the impact on his work of Brecht's epic approach, alienation effect and use of coincidence.[30] Ghatak draws upon the diverse theatrical traditions of IPTA, Brecht and Stanislavski, and the various cinematic visions of Eisenstein, Godard and Bunuel to come up with use own melodramatic vision.[31] The technical details of Ghatak's melodramatic style include the following stylistic traits: frequent use of a wide angle lens, placement of the camera at very high, low and irregular angles, dramatic lighting composition, expressionistic acting style and experimentation with songs and sound effects. With this combination of cinematic devices, Ghatak creates a melodramatic post-Partition world in which he constructs his vision of “Woman” and “Homeland” in post-Independence Bengal.

In cinema, the family, the home, with women — mothers, wives, daughters and sisters as the key players — is the primary site of domestic melodrama.[32] In Bengali culture, the home houses the heart of Bengali society: the family. And at the core of the Bengali family is *ma*, the mother.[33] Within the homes of Ghatak's post-Independence Bengal lies the site of both *ananda* (joy) and *dukkho* (sorrow), emotions intensely expressed by his female characters, frequently through song. These songs and music distill the essence or *rasa* of the joy and sorrow that Ghatak's characters experience, and the music track enables these emotions' full force and weight to be communicated to the audience.[34] The ability of music and song to express powerful emotions beyond the visual dimension of a film, even beyond the film text itself, is particularly evident in Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, and *Subarnarekha*. The film sound scholar Caryl Flinn relates in her book *Strains of Utopia*:

“Melodrama critics assert that the non-representational register (i.e., music) reveals elements which cannot be conveyed through representational means alone, a fundamental split that seems to guarantee the genre's



In a moment of happiness for Nita, her father and brother take her on a birthday outing, but ...



... the visual composition expresses this family's mutual alienation from each other.



Nita's fiancé, Sanat, encounters her, Gita, and Montu at a railway station. Gita financially supports Sanat, who is conducting research in physics without a scholarship.

potentially 'subversive' effects.”[35]

In these two films, Ghatak uses songs and music, from Bengali folksongs to a Nino Rota film score, and sound effects, such as Nita's sonically matched whiplash and Sita's amplified breathing, as a counterpoint to *and* comment on the narrative action. Ghatak is one of the first Indian filmmakers to explore the power and diversity of a film's non-representational register. In these two films, Ghatak specifically focuses on the interrelations between his female characters, the Bengali landscape and Bengali music to visualize a new, often utopic and dystopic, Bengali homeland. In the remainder of this paper, employing theoretical concepts from Geeta Kapur, Kumar Shahani and Hamid Naficy, I will detail scenes from *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha* in order to illustrate this point. After providing a brief synopsis of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, I will provide an analysis of the film's primary female character, Nita, in the context of soundscape and landscape.

Brief synopsis of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*

Meghe Dhaka Tara is set in the late 1950s in Calcutta. The story revolves around a Bengali lower-middle class, refugee family who were victims of Partition and who are now struggling for survival in a *bustee* (“slum”) on the outskirts of the city. The eldest daughter, Nita (“Knowledge”), has given up her college studies in order to work. She is the breadwinner of the family. Her elder brother Shankar, who would normally be the head of the household, is eccentric and irresponsible. He spends his days singing, practicing scales and classical Indian *khayals*, [36] and dreaming of becoming a great singer. Nita's old father teaches in a small school nearby and her mother maintains the house. Nita's selfish younger siblings, Gita and Montu, are still in school. In her bleak life, Nita has only one thing to look forward to: the return of Sanat, a young scientist she hopes one day to marry.

Through many twists and turns of the plot, Nita's family becomes increasingly dependent on her earnings. Nita's father and Montu both have debilitating accidents and Shankar leaves home for Bombay to become a singing star. Sanat does return, but falls in love with and marries Nita's sister, Gita. The stresses and strains of Nita's life take their toll. She develops tuberculosis and, although she is desperately ill, continues to work to support her



Nita in love as she and Sanat sit ...



... by the side of a pond and discuss their future. In the meantime, her mother pushes her sister Gita to be with Sanat.



Nita's father falls and injures himself, so she gives up her studies to work in the city. She learns from her younger brother that Sanat has a job and a new apartment. She goes to visit him there.

family. Shankar returns from Bombay, now an accomplished classical singer, to find Nita wasting away with a terminal illness. Shankar takes her to a sanatorium in the hills where she remains, uncertain whether she will live or die, and forgotten by her family.

Nita as goddess: Durga/Uma/Gauri

The two main female characters of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha* — Nita and Sita — are not only emotionally and physically sacrificed by their families but are also symbolically sacrificed as goddesses. As symbolic goddesses, Nita and Sita represent the Motherland of Bengal and it is Bengali society who sacrifices Her with division and greed.[37] First, I will examine Ghatak's portrayal of Nita, then his construction of Sita, as "Woman," "Goddess," and "Bengal, the Motherland" through the use of various songs and sound effects in the context of the Bengali landscape.

The theoretical work of the Iranian and exilic film scholar Hamid Naficy elucidates what is at stake for Ghatak in these two films and as a filmmaker, particularly as an "accented" or "exilic" filmmaker. [38] Naficy defines "accented" filmmakers as

"situated but universal figures who work in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices." [39]

Characterizing Ghatak as an "accented" or "exilic" filmmaker is appropriate not only because he endured the trauma of the partition of his beloved Bengal, but also because the director cinematically commented on subsequent political and cultural fallout from that tragic separation throughout his career. Ghatak is "interstitial" because he had to struggle constantly to obtain funding and equipment to create the kind of films he wanted, largely outside of the Calcutta and Bombay film studio systems. And he is also interstitial because his films' subject matter and style were often astride that of Indian popular cinema and Bengali art cinema.

The stylistic components of "accented cinema" that I will focus on when detailing scenes with Nita and Sita from *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha* are the open-form, natural exteriors and closed-form, claustrophobic interiors used in the mise-en-scene and setting, and the films' way of eliciting dysphoric, euphoric, or nostalgic structures of feeling, specifically through song, music, and



He is better off financially but not particularly welcoming. He smokes and has ...



... an evasive gaze.



The scene comments on his moral shift by drawing our eye to the image of a voluptuous woman and giddy child on a vase near his ashtray—signaling Sanat's involvement with Gita and her imminent pregnancy.

sound effects. These stylistic components shape *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha*, and resonate with the technical characteristics of Ghatak's melodramatic style detailed above. In these two films, Ghatak emphasizes themes of home, homeland, displacement, rupture, utopia, dystopia, urban vs. rural, city vs. village, etc. In his work, Ghatak agonized over the fact that he and multitudes like him were compulsory exiles, *refugees in their own homeland*, due to the artificial, arbitrary division of Bengal into West Bengal and East Pakistan. Ghatak attempts to illustrate the end result of Partition's forced migration of millions as political, cultural, and geographical deterritorialization and stasis through depicting the entrapment of the female characters of Nita and Sita in their houses and in their fragmented homeland.

In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the character Nita is actually the manifestation of multiple goddesses: Durga as Jagadhatri, the benevolent image of the eternal giver and universal sustainer, and Uma/Gauri, the Mother Goddess.[40] In her essay "Myth and Ritual: Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*," Ira Bhaskar points out how Nita represents the benign manifestation of Durga:

"A prevalent story about the genesis of Durga is the concept of *Havyagni* (oblation to the sacrificial fire). In the ritual of the *Havan* (the act of consigning the mortal offering to the sacrificial flames) is symbolized the surrender of human desires and aspirations which are carried to the heavens with the smoke. It is believed that Durga was born out of this smoke as a transmutation of human desires, taking the form of *Jagadhatari*, the universal sustainer. One of the central images associated with Nita is the courtyard wherein are centered the ambitions of the rest of the family... These selfish ambitions pour into the courtyard, the symbolic *yagna mandapa*, from which manifests Nita in the role of the Provider and Creator." [41]

The sight and sound of the fire that Nita's mother uses symbolically to sacrifice her daughter adds to the construction of the Jagadhatari image in the family courtyard. Traditionally, the courtyard of a Bengali or Indian home is the heart of the household. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the courtyard is an oppressive, suffocating space, particularly for Nita. Significant here is Naficy's

articulation of the outside, external and domestic, internal spaces of accented cinema as feminized and his perception of all accented films as feminine texts. He explains:



Bracelets rattle.

“For the exiles, the house is a site of both deep harmony and hatred... Significantly, the discourse of memory feminized the house as an enclosure of femininity and domesticity, associated with motherhood and reproduction. This is how many exiles feminize the homeland... In the accented cinema, the house is an intensely charged place and a signifying trope.”[42]

Throughout *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the courtyard is “an intensely charged place” that does *not* signify Nita’s potential motherhood. Rather it serves as the site of her tragic deterioration at the hands of her overly dependent family members. Ghatak often cuts or pans from the mother (as the destructive Kali and parasitic Chandi, both malevolent manifestations of Durga), surrounded by the smoke of the hearth, to Nita. With the exaggerated sound of boiling rice serving as the transition, the camera moves from the mother to medium close-ups of Nita as Jagadhatri, the nourishing force who has to be immolated. The pronounced sound of the boiling rice kettle that Nita’s mother is always watching over accentuates her insatiable greed. Whenever the conversation in the courtyard turns to the possibility of Nita, the sole breadwinner of the family, getting married, the sound of the boiling kettle is amplified on the soundtrack, usually in conjunction with a close-up of Nita’s mother’s panic-stricken face.



Nita hears the rattling and realizes that Sanat is now seeing her sister.

In his 1976 article, “Nature, in the End, is Grandly Indifferent,” Ghatak’s former student Kumar Shahani addresses the manifestation of what he calls “the femininity principle in the Indian tradition” in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. Shahani believes that one of Ghatak’s greatest contributions to Indian films was reinvigorating and restoring this femininity principle to its pre-Brahmanical, agrarian roots. Shahani writes:



Dazed, Nita leaves, with the sound effect of the whiplash introduced. She feels its force for the first time...

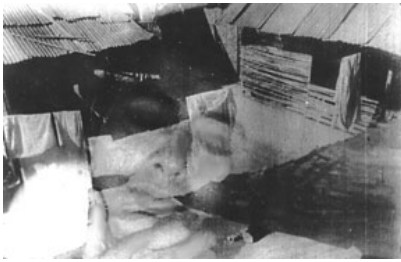
“The triangular division taken from Tantric abstraction is the key to the understanding of this complex film. The inverted triangle represents, in the Indian tradition, fertility and the femininity principle. The breaking up of society is visualized as a three-way division of womanhood. The three principle woman characters embody the traditional aspects of



... as she is shown in close up grasping at her throat. Dissolve to image of ...

feminine power. The heroine, Nita, has the preserving and nurturing quality; her sister, Gita, is the sensual woman; their mother represents the cruel aspect. The incapacity for Nita to combine and contain all these qualities, to retain only the nurturing quality to the exclusion of others, is the source of her tragedy.”[43]

Nita’s blind sustaining of her family at the cost of her health and life is also reflected in her representation as Uma. Ghatak states,



... Nita trapped by the family courtyard, both emotionally and physically.

“Uma has been the archetype of all daughters and brides of all Bengali households for centuries.”[44]

Ghatak’s identification of Nita with Uma is ironic because her family sacrifices her wifehood and motherhood. Throughout *Meghe Dhaka Tara*’s soundtrack, Ghatak uses refrains from Bengali folk songs that lament Uma’s departure from her familial home to go to her husband’s home.[45] One song, mourning Uma’s leaving, Ghatak uses extra-diegetically several times in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, specifically when Nita’s senile father casts her out of the family house when she is dying from tuberculosis. The lyrics go as follows:

Come, my daughter Uma, to me.
Let me garland you with flowers.
You are the soul of my sad self, Mother, the deliverer.
Let me bid you farewell now, my daughter!
You are leaving my home desolate, for your husband’s place.
How do I endure your leaving, my daughter?

Ghatak utilizes this traditional Bengali folk song to counterpoint Nita’s reality; Nita is not the new bride heading for her husband’s home: she is the sickly, unwed daughter who is being banished from her home because she has become a liability rather than an asset. She has been forced into exile. Mirroring her deteriorating condition, Nita’s home has become claustrophobic and ill — strangled by the fears and anxieties of her family. This song ironically comments on Nita’s fate after she has been cast out of her family’s house. For in her role as Uma and the consort of Shiva — Lord of Destruction and Eternal

Time who resides in the Himalayan mountains, Nita goes to a sanatorium in the Shillong hills of Bengal to die, as if in Shiva's lap. In traditional Hindu mythology, the Himalayan mountains are the site of the happy reunion of Uma and her husband, Shiva[46]; but in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, poignantly, a hill station in the mountains is where Nita is cast out to die alone. Thus, Ghatak inverts the traditional Hindu myth where Shiva and Uma share a joyous reunion in the Himalayas to emphasize the tragedy of Nita's impending death. While discussing the multi-faceted Bengali artist Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian cultural historian Geeta Kapur elaborates upon Ghatak's reconstruction of Indian myths:

“But even fewer artists can achieve, simultaneously, the reconstruction of an archetype that turns into a device to speak about the ‘type’ within a class; to present the problem of a class-constructed psyche which so quickly appropriates mythic elements to serve vested interests. I am thinking of Ritwik Ghatak, for whom too [along with Ray] Tagore is a mentor. Certainly in the cinema only this one man, Ghatak, dares to put his stakes so high, and expectedly the cinematic means he uses are bold and hybrid: he does not subscribe to the sacred as such, nor to the revelatory. But nor does he rest content with doubt that declares itself proof of the rational, and an automatic representation, therefore, of the secular. *He places rationality within a melodramatic genre and examines the status of doubt there, in that fraught schema, where tragedy is made to give itself over in favour of praxis.*” (My italics.)[47]

Thus, Ghatak is making use of Indian myths and archetypes within a melodramatic context as an exercise in exploring the degradation of post-Independence Bengali society.

[Continued: Tagore songs](#)

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Nita, Sita and *Rabindra Sangeet*



Shankar gets a job teaching music and starts a musical career. Gita will be married soon to Sanat, and Sita is to sing at the wedding. She asks her brother to teach her a Tagore song, one about a visitation by God. Increasingly isolated both in the family and in the visual compositions, here she sings “her” *Rabindra sangeet*. This is the only time Nita sings in the film.



Shankar sings the *Rabindra sangeet* with Nita and is startled to “hear” the sound of a whiplash.

In *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha*, Ghatak uses songs by Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Bengal’s creative genius, who was a poet, playwright, novelist, short story writer, essayist, painter, song composer (of both lyrics and music), philosopher, teacher, and Nobel Prize winner. Tagore wrote over 2,000 songs, known as *Rabindra sangeet* or Rabindra song, compositions that incorporated elements of Indian classical music and Bengali folk songs.[48][[open notes in new window](#)] In his biography of Tagore, Krishna Kripalani describes the impact of Tagore’s songs in Bengali culture:

“For each change of the season, each aspect of his country’s rich landscape, every undulation of the human heart, in sorrow or joy, has found its voice in some song of his.”[49]

His songs often celebrate Nature and the Divine, specifically in the physical and spiritual context of Bengal. [50]

As previously mentioned, in his films Ghatak utilizes a variety of musical forms, both Indian and non-Indian, and commonly uses Tagore’s music. As Ghatak stated in an interview just before his death:

“I cannot speak without Tagore. That man has culled all of my feelings from long before my birth. He has understood what I am and he has put in all the words. I read him and I find that all has been said and I have nothing new to say.”[51]

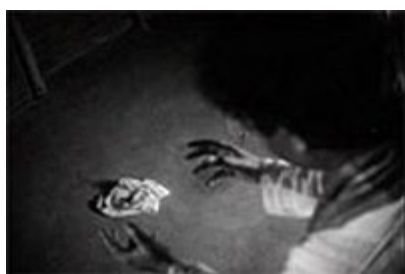
Ghatak, like most Bengalis, considers Tagore as the embodiment of all that is great in Bengali culture, as the pinnacle of artistic expression in Bengal. When Ghatak uses a Tagore song in a film, it often evokes among Bengalis nostalgia and longing for an undivided, pre-Partition Bengal. Ghatak situates Tagore songs within the painful context of the struggle for survival of post-



Nita “feels” the whiplash again.



Nita discovers she has tuberculosis and does not tell the family. She confines herself to one room of the house, and she continues to work to support the family.



Now a singing star, Shankar comes home for a visit. He discovers Nita’s advanced tuberculosis, shockingly evidenced by

Independence Bengali families, and the songs serve to shape and give dimension to the characters of Nita and Sita. In both *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha*, Ghatak uses Tagore songs at climatic moments to express the joy and sorrow of the post-Independence Bengali woman, who must bear the burden of rebuilding the family in the aftermath of Partition.

Nita’s *Rabindra Sangeet*

The only time that Nita sings in the film is just before her sister Gita’s wedding to her [Nita’s] former suitor, Sanat, and before her brother Shankar’s departure to Bombay to launch his singing career. Traditionally, Shankar as the eldest son should have assumed responsibility for the household when his father became incapacitated, but that burden fell to Nita. In the dark and flimsy thatched hut, Nita and Shankar sit feeling melancholy as they look at a photograph of themselves as children in the hills. The sounds of muted raindrops and frogs croaking drift in from the outside.

The claustrophobic interior reflects the suffocation of Nita as her tuberculosis advances. Her home crumbles around her as she herself withers away. Throughout the scene, the heads and profiles of Nita and Shankar are strongly lit from the front and back, often against almost total blackness, giving the composition a disembodied feel. Shankar declares that he is leaving their home in protest against her suffering and smothering at the hands of the family. She asks him to teach her a Tagore song, as she will be expected to sing at Gita’s wedding. As Shankar starts the song and Nita joins in, the camera slowly dollies at a low angle away from them, to a long shot of the pair from across the stifling, dim room. The chasm widens between brother and sister as they sing. The song is about a visitation by God:

I didn’t realize that You had come to my room,
the night when my doors broke down in the
raging storm.
Darkness had encompassed everything,
my oil lamp blew out.
I stretched out my hand to the sky,
though I knew not towards whom.
I lay forlorn in the darkness thinking the storm
a dream,
ignorant that the storm was actually a symbol
of Your victory flag.
Opening my eyes in the morning I am amazed
to behold You,

her blood stained
handkerchief.



Nita's father addresses the family and us, the audience, with his exclamation of "I accuse!" when he is told of his daughter's tuberculosis.



Nita's mother and father contemplate their daughter's banishment from the family home.

standing [there], filling the room, [filling] my heart's void.

Because Nita sings this song at a critical moment in the narrative, when her family is abandoning her and she is becoming increasingly sick, the song appears to be a metaphor for her coming death. This Tagore piece also portends of the sequence to come where Nita's ailing father orders her to leave the house in the middle of the night when a storm is raging outside.

By the end of the song, the camera has dollyed back to the pair; in the remaining shots they are now separately framed. The singular composition of the last few shots of the scene signal Nita's isolation and estrangement from even Shankar. The climatic shot is a low angle, medium close-up of Nita's frightened face. Her eyes widen as she clutches her neck with her hands and silently gasps for air, while the faint sound of a whiplash comes up on the soundtrack. A cut follows to Nita alone in the blackness, collapsed in a heap on the floor. Her sobs meld into a solitary sarod strain on the soundtrack. Thus, the sound of the whiplash undercuts the deliverance that the Tagore song promises. Salvation and redemption are not in Nita's future — not even as a symbolic goddess. Ghatak utilizes the extra-diegetic sound of the whip to represent the weight of social and historical forces bearing down upon Nita, as an individual and as symbolic Motherland, and, by extension, to convey an awareness of these forces to his audience. Ashish Rajadhyaksha has remarked when analyzing *Meghe Dhaka Tara*,

"In the film, there is a constant attempt to bring out the romantic through various conventions and violently negate them, reverse them into an indictment of the romantic sensibility." [52]

The specific "romantic sensibility" that Ghatak is critiquing here has its modern origins in the so-called "Bengali renaissance" of the 19th century, the cultural era from which Tagore emerged. [53] In this scene, Ghatak politically activates *Rabindra sangeet*, pushing it beyond its romantic borders to shed light on the social realities of the present.

[Continued: the sacrifice of Nita](#)

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The sacrifice of Nita



Melodramatically Nita is awakened by a storm ...



... into which she is cast out by her father. She meets Shankar, who



... tells her he is taking her to a sanatorium for her in the Shillong hills—her

The penultimate scene of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* focuses on Nita and takes place in a sanatorium among the Shillong hills of Bengal. In the previous scene, Nita was trapped in a decrepit hut; now she resides in a hospital for the sick and dying in the middle of ostensibly boundless nature. However, the spatial significance of the Shillong hills as the site of Nita's demise is that here nature is not represented as idyllic and timeless, but is suffocating, indifferent and indicative of Nita's mortality. Shankar (Nita's brother who has become a well-known classical Indian singer) is visiting her and they are sitting outside on a vast lawn surrounded by the hills. Nita is framed against the encircling landscape, which reinforces the feminization of the space. However, Nita is not immortalized as a goddess in this space, but is pictured as small, insignificant – as a human who will suffer an agonizing death. Ghatak undermines any, in Naficy's words, “nostalgic longing to the homeland's natural landscape,” for Nita is now hostage to this land, held in permanent exile.[54][\[open notes in new window\]](#)

Shankar relates news of the antics of Gita's (Nita's younger sister's) new son (a motherhood Nita will never experience), when suddenly she gets up, grabs his shirt and frantically cries,

“Brother, you know I really want to live. I love so much to be alive. Brother, tell me once that I will live. Brother, I want to go home. I want to live!”

These last three words are amplified and reverberated on the soundtrack and joined with a droning sound and a whip cracking (two reoccurring sound effects that are always matched with Nita) as the camera pans in dizzying 180 degree panoramic shots of the surrounding hills of Bengal. Nita's violent cry, her unrelenting affirmation of life, counterpoints the claustrophobic confinement in which she will spend her final days. In juxtaposition to Ghatak's expansive and fluid camerawork, Nita's entrapment in this natural space conveys stasis and

childhood refuge. “You will see the hills at last,” he says, and the scene shifts ...



... abruptly to the hilly landscape of Shillong. Nature is not depicted as idyllic but vast and indifferent. In contrast to Ghatak's expansive vistas and fluid camerawork, Nita's entrapment in this natural space conveys stasis and rigidity.



Nita must remain in this now hostile space, cast out, in exile from the family she sacrificed her life for, a family who has forgotten her.

rigidity. The immense landscape appears to collapse around her as she gasps and struggles to find her voice on the soundtrack – for her visual image is now absent and we are left with the sound of her disembodied utterances. Yet Nita, as diseased “Woman,” fallen “Goddess” and dystopian “Bengal” (i.e., “Motherland”), is determined to live on even as she is dying. Ultimately, however, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* illustrates Ghatak's skepticism about the future of the Bengali family and the Bengali homeland. After the following description of *Subarnarekha's* narrative, I will examine the character Sita, as woman and as mythological goddess, shaped by music and landscape.

Brief synopsis of *Subarnarekha*:

Subarnarekha begins in a setting similar to that of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*: a lower middle-class family living in a *bustee* on the outskirts of Calcutta immediately following Partition. This *bustee* is a camp, called “New Life Colony,” for refugees from East Bengal. The narrative of *Subarnarekha* focuses on Sita, whose mother and father were killed during Partition, and who is being raised by her elder brother, Ishwar. Ishwar has also taken in a poor, low-caste boy named Abhiram. They move to the Bengali countryside for a fresh start when Ishwar gets a job as an assistant manager in an iron foundry. Sita spends her life caring for her unmarried brother, until she grows into a young woman and falls in love with Abhiram. Ishwar is determined to find a proper high-caste Hindu husband for Sita and demands that she never see Abhiram again. Ishwar proceeds to arrange Sita's marriage, yet Sita, resolved to marry Abhiram, escapes with him to Calcutta on her wedding night.

Once again living in a *bustee*, the newly married couple has a child, Binu, and Abhiram finds work as a bus driver. One day, he accidentally runs over a child and an angry mob kills him. Sita is forced to earn money for her and Binu. She begins to sing for paying customers, and thus unwittingly becomes a prostitute. One night, Ishwar, on a business trip to Calcutta, visits Sita in a drunken stupor to avail himself of her services, not realizing that this prostitute is his sister. In shock at seeing her brother in these circumstances, Sita kills herself. At the conclusion of the film, Binu is placed in the care of Ishwar, who although devastated, attempts to move on for the sake of his nephew.

Sita as goddess:
Sita/Sati/Radha



Nita tells Shankar of her desire to live.



Nita cries "I want to live!" Again the whiplash cracks on the soundtrack. As the camera pans around the hills, we hear Nita's desperate wails permeate the landscape.



Her cries fade and meld into the silent hills.

Images from *Subarnarekha*

Through song, Ghatak portrays Sita as both mother and lover—as the goddess Sita and the mythical lover of Krishna, Radha.[55] One day, in Chhatimpur in the Bengali countryside, Sita, as a young girl, is idly walking along an abandoned airstrip singing a Bengali folk song when she encounters Ishwar's senile old boss. He asks Sita her name and then proceeds to tell her the story of her birth and death. The old man tells Sita how her mythical namesake was found as a baby in the furrow of a field by King Janak and how she returned to her mother, Earth, when scorned by her husband, Rama, who believed that she had cheated on him with the evil demon, Ravana. Ghatak reworks this mythological tale in *Subarnarekha* to climax with the female character Sita's committing suicide with a kitchen knife in response to the horror of seeing her brother, Ishwar ("God" in Hindi), at her doorstep to solicit her services as a prostitute.

In this film, yet another layer to the reconstruction of the goddess archetype in the character of Sita can be found in the Puranic tale of Sati, another manifestation of the goddess Durga, who burns herself through the fire of her concentration (*yogagni*) in order to satisfy the ethics of good womanhood (*satidharma*) because her father, Daksha, while under the influence of a magic garland had engaged in unseemly sexual behavior towards her.[56] Daksha is greatly opposed to Sati's marriage to the god, Shiva. In *Subarnarekha*, Ishwar represents Daksha, for he is a surrogate father to Sita. As a symbolic father, Ishwar, like Daksha has an incestuous attachment to Sita (Sati) and an intense dislike for her husband Abhiram (Shiva). As Sati immolates herself, similarly Sita sacrifices herself when confronted with the shame of the sexual advances of her drunken brother Ishwar.

Sita as a young woman continually sings melancholy *Krishna kirtan* (songs in praise of Lord Krishna) while sitting among the hills and by the river, *Subarnarekha*. The spaciousness of Sita's homescape as an adolescent contrasts with her claustrophobic confines in Calcutta as a young adult. Sita's rootedness to the surrounding geography of her youth is illustrated in her song and in Ghatak's framing of her in the rocky, riverine landscape. In one scene Sita is sitting on a sandbank and there is a close-up of sand sifting through her hands. The sifting sand symbolizes the time passed since Sita has last seen Abhiram, and evokes the image of Sita as one with the earth, her symbolic mother. Ghatak then pulls back to a



Sita as a girl with her older brother Ishwar.



Sita and Abhiram, a poor youth that Ishwar had taken in at the time of Partition. The children use an abandoned WW2 airport landing strip as their playground.



Sita becoming a woman.

medium close-up and then a long shot of Sita so that we see her on the sandbank by the river with the hills in the background. She begins to sing the following *Krishna kirtan* :

“See the dawn is coming.
The people wake up.
The breeze wakes up.
The birds wake up.
The sky appears.
Oh Shyam [Krishna, the Dark One], why do
you still lie asleep?
Where were you, awake all night?
See the dawn is breaking.”

Ghatak frames Sita as part of the surrounding expanse of landscape and nature while she sings this song of longing so as to identify Sita, as Sita her namesake, with her mother, Earth, and to depict Sita, as Radha, singing her song of love in separation to Abhiram, as Krishna. Ghatak’s use of a wide angle lens serves to fuse together the vast, open vista and the image of Sita as iconic motherland. The use of a *Krishna kirtan*, which portrays the Krishna/Radha dilemma of love in separation, is also a metaphor for the division of Bengal and the nostalgia and longing that geographical separation has engendered. Ghatak’s constant use of *Krishna kirtan* throughout *Subarnarekha* serves to permeate the film with a feel of yearning for a united Bengal.

Sita’s *Rabindra Sangeet*

Sita’s growth as a woman is told through song, particularly a song by Tagore. The song personifies Sita and follows her life’s trajectory. As a small girl, Sita sings the song, which describes and revels in the surrounding nature of the rural Bengal landscape. After she runs away to marry Abhiram against Ishwar’s wishes, her brother is so haunted by the song that he attempts to hang himself. As a wife and mother, Sita sings this same song from her childhood to her son, Binu. And after her death, Binu suddenly breaks into the song, offering a glimmer of hope at the conclusion of the film. Ghatak uses the song to illustrate the innocence and openness of the world of Sita and Binu as children and to serve as a counterpoint to the degradation and boundedness of the environment of Sita and Ishwar as adults. The song goes:



Sita as a young woman with Ishwar, who has intense feelings for her. She takes care of him and Abhiram.



Sita sings a *Krishna kirtan* to the river landscape.



Abhiram expresses his feelings to Sita.



The sun and shade play hide and seek over the paddy field today;
someone has floated rafts of white clouds on the blue sky.
Today the bumblebees forgot to draw nectar from the flowers;
instead they gleefully flit around in the [morning] light.
Today the birds swarm the riverbed, no one knows why.
We will not go home today,
we will stay out and absorb nature as much as we can....
The day will be spent (idly), only by playing the flute.

In the final shot sequence of *Subarnarekha*, Sita's son, Binu, is sitting at a train station with Sita's brother, Ishwar. Binu is staring blankly into space while remembering how Sita, now dead, used to sing this Tagore song from her childhood to him, as the song slowly comes up on the soundtrack. In close-up, Binu begins singing the song, which greatly surprises and saddens Ishwar. Here, Ghatak interweaves history, memory and nature. This *Rabindra sangeet* represents Sita's voice as it echoes across the riverine countryside, like Nita's voice resonates against the Shillong hills at the end of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. The feminized homeland remains, but the women endure only as fractured, disembodied memories.

In the next and final scene, Binu and Ishwar are seen in a wide angle, long shot, trudging along the banks of the Subarnarekha river in West Bengal, surrounded by hills and trees. Binu leads the dazed, plodding Ishwar by the hand and incites him to move along into the seemingly endless, daunting landscape. The pair is attempting to go home. It is a home they will now have to recreate after Sita's suicide. The film's opening classical Indian *raga* and women's chorus rise up on the soundtrack to join with the sound of rushing water and Binu's childish voice. The women's chorus fades to a single, female voice as the final shot reveals the Bengali inscription, "Victory to man, to this new born child, ever-living." Thus, Ghatak leaves us with the sound and image of children as the only hope for the survival of post-Independence Bengal.

The sacrifice of Sita

Ishwar has forced Sita's betrothal to a high caste man, but here Sita and Abhiram plan to escape on the day of her planned wedding.



The couple move to Calcutta, but Abhiram is killed by an angry mob. Here she learns of his death.



Ishwar gets drunk and seeks a prostitute.



Sita awaits her first

At the end of *Subarnarekha*, Sita is truly in exile. She now resides alone in a rented room with her son because she has had to flee her home in the countryside due to her brother's irrational jealousy towards her husband, Abhiram, and now the husband is dead. While Sita's youth was spent in "the idyllic open structures of home (that) emphasize continuity," her adulthood devolves in the urban slums of Calcutta – "those paranoid structures of exile (that) underscore rupture." [57] In the sequence where Sita commits suicide, Ghatak's ingenious employment of sound is fully realized. Sita's sacrificial final scene is related entirely through song, sound effects and silence. It has no dialogue. When the completely inebriated Ishwar arrives at Sita's house, he has no idea that Sita is the prostitute whom he is visiting. Ishwar is not only drunk but also almost blind because earlier in a bar he dropped his glasses and stepped on them. He is literally and symbolically visionless. His inability to see beyond Abhiram's lower caste status has propelled Sita into these dire circumstances. In order to maintain his position in his job and society, Ishwar has renounced Sita, his only family member.

Exiting a taxi, Ishwar stumbles towards Sita's house; a point of view shot illustrates his blurry and distorted vision. As Ishwar stands weaving back and forth on the threshold of the door to Sita's suffocatingly small, dark room, the faint strains of Nino Rota's *La Dolce Vita* [58] theme are heard as we see an out-of-focus long shot of Sita. In his article, "Sound in Cinema," Ghatak states:

"There are times when a tune used in a film by someone else is used to make an observation, the way I myself have done. The music that accompanies the scene of orgy at the end of *La Dolce Vita*, where Fellini lashes out at the whole of Western civilization, is known as *Patricia*. I sought to make a similar statement in my *Subarnarekha* about my own land, this Bengal, so sparkling with intellect. So I have used the same music in the bar scene [and in Sita's suicide scene], to make a suggestion. Was I influenced? Not at all. The music merely helped me say a lot of things." [59]

"Helped me say a lot of things" for Ghatak refers to his commentary on the senselessness of the dissolution of post-Independence Bengali culture and society. As Kumar Shahani has explained while discussing Ghatak's evolution of an "epic" cinematic form:

“customer.”



She recognizes that the “customer” at her doorstep is Ishwar.



Bewildered, Ishwar watches Sita's suicide.



Binu is Sita and Abhiram's son. Here he urges Ishwar to follow him home.

“In *Subarnarekha*, the dramatic element disintegrates, its clichés are turned against itself; the traumatic prostitution of our culture is exemplified as Sanskrit becomes part of *La Dolce Vita* in one of the world's poorest cities. We are made to face our self-destructive incestuous longings which are otherwise so delicately camouflaged by both our sophisticated and vulgar filmmakers.”[60]

The Rota theme becomes a loud drone as Ghatak cuts to a medium close-up of Ishwar drenched in sweat. The drone fades into the sound of Sita's rapid, terrified breathing. There is a cut to a blurred close-up of Sita's petrified face and frozen doe-like eyes. Visually and aurally the feeling of Sita's claustrophobia and confinement is accelerated.

In the final seconds of the scene, Ghatak constructs a powerful montage of sound and visuals. With Sita's exaggerated breathing serving as an audio transition, Ghatak cuts to a large kitchen knife, then to an extreme close-up of Sita's unblinking eye filling the frame. Her body is now completely fragmented; her identity reduced to an omniscient eye, in contrast to Ishwar's physical and metaphorical blindness. Sita is trapped, inert with fear; her goddess stature diminished to a distorted and disembodied representation. Then there is a very quick cut to Sita's picking up the knife accompanied by the fleeting sound of a knife being sharpened. We hear a crash of cymbals and a dull thud as a cut to a confused, reeling Ishwar reveals a few bloodstains on his white *kurta*. With the drone of strings, more blood spurts on to Ishwar's clothes. We see the table with Sita's *tambora* (a traditional Indian string instrument) on it shaking, joined by the sound of Sita's bangles and body in her death throes. The camera swiftly pans around the room and lands upon a shot of Ishwar's face reflected in a small mirror on a bed – also on the bed are a comb, some hair clips, and Sita's arm and hand, her fingers clutching, desperately clawing, the white sheet as she dies.

Then there is a cut to a close-up of Ishwar's blood-spattered face followed by the first in-focus shot of Sita's face – as a death masque – and absolute silence. The sonic and visual impact of Sita's self-sacrifice is shocking. The dramatic construction of the scene underscores the epic tragedy of Sita's death – the sacrifice of Bengal – caused by the decadence of Ishwar, the excesses of Bengali society.



The film's opening classical Indian *raga* and women's chorus rise up on the soundtrack to join with the sound of rushing water and Binu's childish voice.



Poster from film *Subarnarekha*.

Conclusion

In Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha*, representations of "Woman" and "Homeland" are inextricably intertwined in setting, sound, and song. Mixing and layering traditions with innovations infused with socio-historical observations and critiques, Ghatak creates a cinema that offers a complex vision of post-Independence Bengal, where both dystopian and utopian futures are envisioned for his Bengali homeland. Hamid Naficy has observed:

"But exile must not be thought of as a generalized condition of alienation and difference, or as one of the items on the diversity-chic menu. All displaced people do not experience exile equally or uniformly. Exile discourse thrives on detail, specificity and locality. There is a *there* in exile." [61]

As an exilic filmmaker, Ghatak attempts to portray the ambivalence and contradictions of Bengali society in post-Partition Bengal. And as a refugee, Ghatak is compelled in his work to interrogate and continually reassess Bengal's cultural memory, identity, and history.

In his 1970s essay, "Society, Our Traditions, Filmmaking and My Effort," Ghatak states:

"Child's play with film is no longer fitting. The huge formative nation-building role of films in this country will be here soon." [62]

In his films, Ghatak not only constructs varying visions of his Bengali homeland, but also consciously attempts to activate film's political and cultural role in newly independent India.

[Continued: Endnotes](#)

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Endnotes

1. This article is part of a chapter in my forthcoming dissertation on the films of Ritwik Ghatak for the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. I would like to thank the editors at *Jump Cut* for their invaluable comments that have enhanced this article and my work in general. I would like to particularly thank Jyotiki Virdi for her assistance and persistence.

[\[return to essay\]](#)

2. To avoid reader confusion, I must note here the West Bengal Government's passage of a constitutional amendment declaring from January 1, 2001, the beginning of the new millennium, that Calcutta was officially renamed Kolkata. A variety of reasons for the name change were given, ranging from the argument that "the new name would reflect the pronunciation of the city's name in Bengali and would protect the state's linguistic identity," to the contention that the new name "suggests a compromise between acknowledging the city's colonial past and the need to restore its threatened identity as a Bengali city." For more on the history of the city's name, see Krishna Dutta, *Calcutta: A Cultural and Literary History* (Northampton: Interlink Books, 2003), pp. 1-4. Given the historical context I am discussing, I will use "Calcutta" throughout this paper.

3. For more on IPTA, see Rustom Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theater of Bengal* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1983); Eugene Van Erven, *The Playful Revolution: Theatre and Liberation in Asia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); and particularly, Sudhi Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Movement in India: Chronicles and Documents, Vols. I-III* (Calcutta: Santi Pradhan, 1979-1985), and IPTA, *50th Anniversary Volume of IPTA* (Calcutta: 1993). For more on this period of Ghatak's artistic life see: Atnu Pal, ed. *Ritwik Kumar Ghatak* (Calcutta: Ritwik Memorial Trust 1988), specifically Ghatak's lengthy interview in Bengali with Probir Sen, 14-48. This interview has been recently translated into English in Sandipan Bhattacharya and Sibaditya Dasgupta, eds., *Ritwik Ghatak: Face to Face* (Calcutta: Cinecentral, 2003). In addition to his engagement with theater in the late 1940s, Ghatak began writing short stories, which are collected in Bengali in *Ritwik Ghataker Golpo* (Calcutta: Ritwik Memorial Trust, 1987), and translated into English by Rani Ray in a collection entitled *Ritwik Ghatak: Stories* (New Delhi: Srishti Publishers, 2001).

4. Bijan Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* is about the millions of peasants who died during the Bengal famine of 1943-1944. The inflationary market for rice, heavily demanded by India's army during World War II, led grain merchants and moneylenders in Calcutta to buy up peasant stocks that should have been kept in villages for food and seed. Bijan Bhattacharya was an actor, writer and founding member of IPTA, who starred in many of Ghatak's films and was a lifelong friend. Dinabandhu Mitra's *Neeldarpan* is about the plight of a Bengali landlord's family and its tenants at the hands of the British indigo planters in the late 19th century. Both plays were social-political landmarks in both Bengali and Indian theater.

5. *On The Cultural Front: A Thesis Submitted by Ritwik Ghatak to the Communist Party of India in 1954* (Calcutta: Ritwik Memorial Trust, 2000).

6. See "Crisis in Bengal IPTA," in Sudhi Pradhan, ed., *Marxist Cultural Movement in India, Vol. 1* (Calcutta: Santi Pradhan, 1979), pp. 324-332. The history of the CPI is also fractious, with a split of the party in 1964 into the CPI and the CPI (Marxist), and the splintering in 1969 of the CPI(M) into the CPI(M) and CPI(Marxist-Leninist). See "The Communist Party," in Sumanta Banerjee, *India's Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising* (London: Zed Books, 1984), pp. 58-81.

7. See "Paradise Café" in Mrinal Sen, *Montage: Life. Politics. Cinema*. (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002), pp. 105-109. In 1947, Chidananda Das Gupta (the noted Indian film critic) and Satyajit Ray (India's first internationally recognized filmmaker) formed the Calcutta Film Society, which for the first time introduced many novice Bengali filmmakers, such as Ghatak and Sen, to European and Soviet films.

8. See Sen, *Montage*, pp. 106-108 and Ritwik Ghatak, *Cinema and I* (Calcutta; Ritwik Memorial Trust, 1987), p. 110 for details of Ghatak's union activities.

9. For more details of Ghatak's life and work in English, including a comprehensive filmography, see *Rows and Rows of Fences: Ghatak on Cinema* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2000). Some of the essays and interviews included in this collection were originally in English, and some have been translated into English from Bengali. Much of the material from *Cinema and I* has been reprinted in *Rows and Rows of Fences*.

10. The Partition of India in 1947 is commonly referred to as simply "Partition". It should be noted that in addition to the 1947 Partition and the Bangladeshi War of Independence's 1971 partition of East Pakistan and West Pakistan into Bangladesh and Pakistan, Bengal suffered another wrenching "partition" in the twentieth century — Lord Curzon's 1905 partition of Bengal (then a British province) into East Bengal and West Bengal. Britain reunified Bengal in 1911, but the provinces of Bihar

and Orissa were created out of Bengali land and the central government's capital was moved from Calcutta to Delhi, to be renamed New Delhi.

For more on the 1905 division of Bengal see, Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-1908* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973). For more on the 1971 division of East Pakistan and West Pakistan, see Richard Sisson and Leo E. Rose, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India, and the Creation of Bangladesh* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

[11.](#) Ghatak instructed “alternative” directors such as John Abraham, Mani Kaul, and Kumar Shahani during his brief but influential time as an instructor and Vice-Principal at the Film and Television Institute of India in Pune from 1964-1965. Beginning in the early 1960s, Ghatak suffered from alcoholism and mental illness. He was hospitalized for the first time in late 1965. For the rest of his life he was in and out of mental hospitals and psychiatric treatment.

12. From 1992-1997, I resided in Calcutta for extended periods of time for language study and dissertation fieldwork. During my various stays, I saw *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha*, which are in black and white, multiple times in 35 mm. For this paper I worked from excellent, unsubtitled video copies. To assist in translating the films' dialogue and songs, I have copies of Ghatak's subtitling spotting sheets (pages that correlate the dialogue with the footage of the film) that are in Bengali and English. The Ritwik Memorial Trust recently reprinted the complete film script of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* in Bengali, which I am also utilizing. In 2002, the British Film Institute came out with a finely restored *Meghe Dhaka Tara* on video and DVD.

13. In Bengali, several words exist that have the connotation of “refugee”: *chinnamul* or “uprooted”; *bastuchara* or “displaced person”; *sharanarathi* or “refugee”; and, *udvastu* or “homeless person.” In the beginning of his article, “Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of Partition,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (August 10, 1996), pp. 2143-2151, Dipesh Chakrabarty does an excellent job of detailing the significance of *udvastu* as one who has been placed outside of his ancestral, foundational home.

14. To illustrate the intense love and attachment that Bengalis had for pre-Partition Bengal, the subsequent tremendous sense of loss and nostalgia they experienced for their ancestral homes and motherland as a result of Partition, and Ghatak's ability to tap into those emotions, I offer the following quote:

“There was a wound in the heart of my father, a raw wound. Many physicians were consulted—to no effect; consequently, the wound did not heal. He carried this wound with him until the eve of his death. Toward the end of his life, he used to sit quietly. He saw Ritwik's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* ten times, *Subarnarekha* eight times — and until the end of his life he

carried with him Ritwik's *Titas Ekti Nadir Nam*. ["A River Called Titas"]... Father had no further opportunities to go to Bangladesh [formerly East Bengal]. This sorrow of not being able to return ate into him for the rest of his life. Father intentionally built his house close to the border [between West Bengal and Bangladesh]. He used to say that if I inhaled [the air] here, I would be able to smell the earth of Satkhira, Bagura and Jessore. And just to be able to smell this earth, Father would repeatedly watch [Ritwik's] *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Subarnarekha* and *Komal Gandhar*."

From Loken Ray's, "*Madhokhane bera*" ("A Fence in Between"), in *Pratidin*, (September 1997). See also, Ranabir Samaddar, ed. *Reflections on Partition in the East* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, 1997) and Chakrabarty, "Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of Partition." It is important to emphasize here that in his films, Ghatak does not often directly address the plight of Bengali Muslims in post-Partition Bengal. The narratives and main characters of his films primarily focus on Bengali Hindus. In his "Remembered Villages," Chakrabarty succinctly articulates this "fundamental problem in the history of modern Bengali nationality, the fact that the nationalist construction of 'home' was a Hindu home." p. 2150.

15. Ghatak, *Rows and Rows of Fences*, p. 92.

16. From an interview with Ghatak in *Chitrabikshan Annual*, (1975), as reprinted and translated in Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Amrit Gangar, eds., *Ghatak: Arguments and Stories* (Bombay: Screen Unit, 1987), p. 92. Also found in Bhattacharya and Dasgupta, eds., *Ritwik Ghatak: Face to Face*, p. 67.

17. For a collection of articles on melodrama in Asian cinema, see Wimal Dissanayake, ed. *Melodrama and Asian Cinema* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1993); for work on melodrama in 1940s and 1950s Hindi/Bombay film, see Ravi Vasudevan, "The Melodramatic Mode and the Commercial Hindi Cinema: Notes on Film History, Narrative and Performance in the 1950s," *Screen*, vol. 30, no. 3 (Summer 1989), pp. 29-50; as well as his "Addressing the Spectator of a 'Third World' National Cinema: The Bombay 'Social' Film of the 1940s and 1950s," *Screen*, vol. 36, no.4 (Winter 1995), pp. 305-324. Also see Ravi Vasudevan, ed., *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), particularly the section entitled "The 1950s: Melodrama and the Paradigms of Cinematic Modernity," pp. 99-142. E. Ann Kaplan, in her essay "Melodrama, Cinema and Trauma," *Screen*, vol. 42, no. 2 (Summer 2001), pp. 201-205, urges film scholars to examine the relationship between melodrama and "cultural" or "historical" trauma, which I explore in my dissertation on Ghatak's work.

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18. The even larger Indian cinematic context includes other regional cinemas, such as Madras (now called Chennai) or Tamil film of south India. Stephen Hughes and Sara Dickey have conducted work in this area. For more on Satyajit Ray, see Satyajit Ray, *Our Films, Their Films* (Calcutta: Orient Longman Limited, 1976), Andrew Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), and Darius Cooper, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray: Between Tradition and Modernity* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

For more on Mrinal Sen, see John W. Hood, *Chasing the Truth: The Films of Mrinal Sen* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1993), Deepankar Mukhopadhyay, *The Maverick Maestro: Mrinal Sen* (New Delhi: Indus, 1995), Sumita S. Chakravarty, ed., *The Enemy Within: The Films of Mrinal Sen* (Wiltshire, England: Flicks Books, 2000), and Mrinal Sen, *Montage: Life. Politics. Cinema*, 2002.

19. Vasudevan, "Shifting Codes, Dissolving Identities: The Hindi Social Film of the 1950s as Popular Culture," in *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, pp. 99-121. One of the main critiques of popular Indian commercial cinema that Vasudevan is referring to emanates from members of the Calcutta Film Society, particularly the writings of film critic Chidananda Das Gupta.

20. Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, eds., *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 147. Rajadhyaksha's *Ritwik Ghatak: A Return to the Epic* (Bombay: Screen Unit, 1982) is one of the first and few books in English to analyze Ghatak's films.

21. In 1950s and 1960s Bengali commercial cinema, the melodramatic films of the star duo Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen also greatly added to the genre's popularity. See Moinak Biswas' "The Couple and Their Spaces: *Harano Sur* as Melodrama Now," in Vasudevan, *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, pp. 122-142.

22. See Kapur's "Articulating the Self into History: Ritwik Ghatak's *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo*," in her insightful and engaging collection, *When Was Modernism: Essays in Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000), pp. 181-200, and Shahani's various articles on Ghatak collected in Rajadhyaksha and Gangar, eds., *Ghatak: Arguments and Stories*, 1987. Additional compelling readings of Ghatak's films include Raymond Bellour's meticulous formalist analysis of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, entitled "The Film We Accompany," and Moinak Biswas' examination of several of Ghatak's films in "Her Mother's Son: Kinship and History in Ritwik Ghatak". Both of these essays are in *Rouge*, (2004) at <http://www.rouge.com.au/index.html>.

23. The *Upanishads* are philosophical and mystical texts of India, believed to have been composed from around 700 B.C.E. onwards. From Carl Jung, Ghatak derived the idea of the archetype. As Pravina Cooper has observed: "The individual, Ghatak felt, needed "archetypes" or collective frameworks by which his unconscious could project into the

conscious.”, p. 99, in “Ritwik Ghatak between the Messianic and the Material,” *Asian Cinema*, vol. 10, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 1999), pp. 96-106.

24. Ghatak, *Rows and Rows of Fences*, p. 8.

25. In Bhattacharya and Dasgupta, eds., *Ritwik Ghatak, Face to Face*, pp. 76-88.

26. The Bengali folk dramatic form known as *jatra* (literally “going” or “journey”), combines acting, songs, music, and dance, and is characterized by a stylized delivery and exaggerated gestures and oration. Scholars believe *jatra* to have originated in the 16th century with the *Krishna Jatra* of Chaitanya and his devotees. After World War I, nationalistic and patriotic themes were incorporated into *jatra*. Mukanda Das (1878-1934) and his troupe, the Swadeshi Jatra Party, performed *jatras* about colonial exploitation, the nationalist struggle, and the oppression of the feudal and caste system. See “*jatra*” at <http://banglapedia.com>.

27. See Rajadhyaksha, *Ritwik Ghatak: A Return to the Epic*. For a good review of this book, see Jasodhara Bagchi, “A Statement of Bias,” *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, no. 3 (April-June 1983), pp. 51-62. For more on myth, archetype and ritual in Ghatak’s films see, Ira Bhaskar, “Myth and Ritual: Ghatak’s *Meghe Dhaka Tara*,” *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, no. 3 (April-June 1983), pp. 43-50. In “Genres in Indian Cinema,” Sanjeev Prakash describes Ghatak’s use of myth and metaphor as “ultrareal,” *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, no. 9 (Oct.-Dec. 1984), pp. 23-33.

28. Ghatak, *Rows and Rows of Fences*, pp. 21-22.

29. Significant to Ghatak’s use of “tradition” or the “traditional” in the context of the “modern” or “modernity” is Geeta Kapur’s contextualization of the terms in “Detours from the Contemporary” (in *When Was Modernism: Essays in Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, p. 267):

“The persistence of the terms ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ as they figure in third-world debates are best appreciated if we see them as notations within the cultural polemic of decolonization. They may be used in all earnestness as essential categories and real options, but in fact they are largely pragmatic features of nation-building and mark the double (or multiple) register of a persuasive nationalist discourse. Sufficiently historicized, both tradition and modernity can notate a radical purpose in the cultural politics of the third world. Certainly the term tradition as we use it in the present equation for India and the third world is not what is given or received as a disinterested civilizational legacy, if ever there should be such a thing. This tradition is what is invented in the course of a struggle. It marks off the territories/identities of a named people. In this sense it is a

signifier drawing energy from an imaginary resource – the ideal tradition. Yet it always remains, by virtue of its strongly ideological import, an ambivalent and often culpable sign in need of constant historical interpretation so that we know which way it is pointing.”

30. Ghatak references Brecht throughout *Rows and Rows of Fences*, especially pp. 22 and 34, and *Ritwik Ghatak: Face to Face*, particularly pp. 13 and 105.

31. Throughout the essays and interviews in *Rows and Rows of Fences*, Ghatak discusses the impact of these theatrical and cinematic forms and styles on his work. Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* and Bunuel’s *Nazarin* were two of Ghatak’s favorite films.

32. See Christine Gledhill’s excellent anthology, *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987).

33. The worship of Ma, the Mother Goddess (in the form of Durga), is a daily practice for many Bengalis. The Durga-Puja festival is the most important Hindu religious festival in Bengal.

34. For examinations of the relationship between music and image in film (although primarily Hollywood film), see James Buhler, Caryl Flinn, and David Neumeyer, eds., *Music and Cinema* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), Caryl Flinn, *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), and Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

35. Caryl Flinn, *Strains of Utopia*, p. 133.

36. A *khayal* combines the classicism of *dhrupada* (where the lyrics are lofty and are strictly developed without flippant embellishments) and the romanticism of *thumri* (light songs influenced by Urdu-Persian poetry and sung in Hindi). *Khayals* may be in praise of gods or royal patrons; they may center on divine or human love; and they may be devotional, philosophical or seasonal. For more on *khayals*, see Sumati Mutatkar, *Aspects of Indian Music* (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1987): 84-89.

37. For more on this trope in Bengali thought, see “The Moment of Departure: Culture and Power in the Thought of Bankimchandra,” in Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Tokyo: Zed Books Ltd., 1986), particularly, pp. 79-81. For more on this trope in Indian film in general, see Rosie Thomas, “Sanctity and Scandal: The Mythologization of Mother India,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 11 (1989), pp. 11-30.

38. Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 10. Also see Hamid Naficy, ed., *home, exile, homeland: film, media, and the politics of place* (London: Routledge, 1999).

39. Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, p. 10.

40. For more on Durga see Dulal Chaudhuri, *Goddess Durga: The Great Mother* (Calcutta: Mrimol Publishers, 1984). The identification of Nita with Durga/Jagadhatari is clear in the film. Ghatak attests to this identification in numerous essays and interviews. See specifically, Haimanti Banerjee, *Ritwik Kumar Ghatak: A Monograph* (Pune: National Film Archive of India, 1985), pp. 56-57. For more on Uma, see Narendra Bhattacharyya, *The Indian Mother Goddess* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1977), pp. 62-63.

41. Ira Bhaskar, "Myth and Ritual: Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*," *Journal of Arts and Ideas* (April-June 1983), pp. 43-50.

42. Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, p. 169. Earlier in this chapter, Naficy states:

"The space that exile creates in the accented cinema is gendered, but not in the binary fashion of the classical (i.e., Hollywood) cinema. And if gender is coded dyadically, the poles may be reversed. For example, the outside, public spaces of the homeland's nature and landscape are largely represented as feminine and maternal. The inside, enclosed spaces—particularly those in the domestic sphere—are also predominantly coded as feminine. In that sense, all accented films, regardless of the genre of their directors or protagonists, are feminine texts. These films destabilize the traditional binary schema gender and spatiality because, in the liminality of deterritorialization, the boundaries of gender, genre, and sexuality are blurred and continually negotiated." (pp. 154-155).

43. Gangar and Rajadhyaksha, eds., *Ghatak: Arguments and Stories*, pp. 51-52.

44. Ghatak, *Rows and Rows of Fences*, p. 6.

45. These songs are called *vijaya* songs and express a mother's sorrow at the departure of her daughter for the home of her husband. In *vijaya* songs, the goddess Durga/Uma is represented as a typical young Bengali bride. *Vijaya* songs are usually sung at Uma's departure on the tenth and concluding day of Durga Puja which occurs during the month of Asvin in September/October. For more on Kali and Uma in the devotional poetry of Bengal, see Rachel McDermott's nuanced research and translation work in her *Mother of My Heart, Daughter of My Dreams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Also see Sumanta Banerjee, "Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth

Century Bengal,” in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 132-134.

46. I must point out here that “the mighty Shiva of Aryan mythology” is often depicted as “a corpulent and indolent hemp-smoker in Bengali folklore,” thus adding another layer of meaning to Nita’s banishment and symbolic return to Shiva. See, *Ibid*, p. 133.

47. Geeta Kapur, “Revelation and Doubt: ‘Sant Tukaram’ and ‘Devi’,” in Tejaswini Niranjana, P. Sudhir, and Vivek Dhareshwar, eds., *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1993), p. 42-43. Also found in *When Was Modernism*.

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48. For more on *Rabindra Sangeet*, see Jayasri Banerjee, ed., *The Music of Bengal: Essays in Contemporary Perspective* (Bombay: Indian Musicological Society, 1988), pp. 81-92; also, Sumati Mutatkar, ed., *Aspects of Indian Music: A Collection of Essays* (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1987), pp. 127-131; and, Sukumar Ray, *Music of Eastern India* (Calcutta, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay Publishers, 1973), pp. 161-188.

49. Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Publishers, 1980).

50. For more on the major themes of Tagore’s songs, see Banerjee, ed., *The Music of Bengal*, pp. 81-92; Mutatkar, ed., *Aspects of Indian Music*, p. 129; Ray, *Music of Eastern India*, pp. 168-175.

51. From a 1976 interview with Ghatak entitled, “I Am Only Recording the Great Changes,” reprinted and translated in Sibaditya Dasgupta and Sandipan Bhattacharya, eds., *Ritwik Ghatak: Face to Face*, p. 110.

52. Rajadhyaksha, *A Return to the Epic*, p. 75.

53. For a short but informative piece on the “Bengal Renaissance,” see Sumit Sarkar’s “Calcutta and the ‘Bengal Renaissance,’” in Sukanta Chaudhuri, ed. *Calcutta: The Living City, Volume I: The Past* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 95-105.

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54. Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, p. 5.

55. For more on Radha, see Edward C. Dimock, Jr., *The Place of the Hidden Moon* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966).

56. In her dense and provocative piece, “Moving Devi,” Gayatri Spivak recounts the various deaths of Sati, in *Cultural Critique*, vol. 47 (Winter 2001), pp. 120-163. The *Puranas* are epic, mythological and devotional texts sacred to Hinduism and are believed to have originated during the

first millennium C.E.

57. *An Accented Cinema*, p. 188.

58. For a relevant interview with Nino Rota, see Lilianna Betti, *Fellini* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1979), pp. 154-164.

59. Ghatak, *Rows and Rows of Fences*, p. 76.

60. Gangar and Rajadhyaksha, eds., *Ghatak: Arguments and Stories*, p. 62.

61. Naficy, *home, exile, homeland*, p. 4.

62. The piece is in a collection of Bengali essays on film by Ghatak, entitled, *Chalachitra, Manush, Ebong Aro Kichu* ["Cinema, Man, and Something More"], (Calcutta: Sandhan Samabayhi Prakashani, 1975), pp. 3-10.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Gender and power among
the Pharisees and Romans



Much of the film implicitly
comments on masculinity.
And the film's overt anti-
Semitism partly derives
from its visual style.
Pharisees are seen as a
conniving group



... dressed in ornate gilded
robes. Here, Caiphas, the
high priest.

The Passion of the Christ Reflections on Mel's monstrous messiah movie and the culture wars

by [Robert Smart](#)

Watching Mel Gibson's splatter-movie passion, I wondered, was Gibson beaten as a child? Did he undergo the kind of severe corporeal punishment that conservative Christian child-rearing manuals advocate? [\[1\]](#) "Spare the rod," authoritarian methods of discipline are intended to create obedient, unquestioning children, often future members of the fundamentalist Christian community. But when children experience of early pain and terror, that shapes their entire development and often leads to depression, aggression (tolerable when channeled), denial of feelings, and sexual dysfunction. Today's advocates of corporal punishment have to reject a by now large body of psychological research [\[2\]](#) and resort to the Bible for justification—almost exclusively the Old Testament.

Physically beaten children characteristically become terrified of freedom and ambiguity. It's hard for them to rely on their own perceptions and intellectual powers to make their way through the adult social world's complex reality. They're taught to rely on external authority to guide their behavior, and they learn to embrace a morality dictated by external compulsion and fear of horrific punishment. Obedience to authority becomes a moral ideal, with a suspicion of those who don't submit, or who insist on thinking for themselves.

The Passion's emphasis on physical beating reminds me of a parallel social situation to that of the beaten child's. That is, the religious right has been skillfully



The Pharisees have their own militia, who sieze Jesus at the film's opening. They are dressed in strange body armor, with feathers, as if from a movie about Attila the Hun.



The Pharisee scenes have a brown hue, often set in crowded locales, often shot angled down. This visual style makes Jewish rule look retrograde, even irrational.



In addition, the Jewish leaders are often assigned facial gestures that connote a clever "putting one over" on the Roman authorities, as a militiaman does here to a Roman soldier who challenges his taking Jesus captive. It's another Jewish stereotype about being

and aggressively accumulating power and influence in this country in order to make all citizens and governmental policy submit to its moral regime. *The Passion* and its relentless marketing to conservative religious groups seem to mark a decisive moment in the evolving culture war, an exploiting of the church group for profit and ever increasing social power. For Gibson, the aggressive marketing of the film to religious groups was a profitable tactic and resulted in a box office of \$76.2 million worth of tickets for the first three days—"the seventh-best three-day opener of all time, and the best for a new release in February."[\[3\]](#)

Prior to its release, the film provoked fears that it would engender feelings of anti-Semitism—based largely on leaked copies of the screenplay. Gibson's elderly father, a member of a Catholic splinter group that diverged from the mainstream Church in the early 60s after Vatican II, publicly has denied the Holocaust ever occurred. In the months leading up to the film's release, he vented numerous anti-Semitic comments. Gibson himself has been somewhat disingenuous on this issue, telling Diane Sawyer that he can't be anti-Semitic because there are Encyclicals about this and that his father "never lies."[\[4\]](#) Unfortunately, the Pope issued Encyclicals stating that the Jews were not responsible for the murder of Christ *after* Mel's splinter group left the Church. And that group has pointedly disavowed all proclamations issued by the mainstream Catholic Church since that time. For example, Gibson himself told an interviewer that he couldn't include the Jew Ciaphas' speaking the infamous blood libel, "Let the blood be on our heads," because "they" would come to his house and shoot him![\[5\]](#) Despite the film's heavy handed anti-Semitism, however, I don't think it's Jews who may end up as the most vulnerable, indeed primary, targets of the film's stirred-up fervor. I see another set of possible victims in the offing.

As I watched this film, I felt the grim realization that to the church group who'd inadvertently given me a free ticket, I was one of the goats to relegate to the flames. As a child I was ostracized and made to feel that I was somehow different, and despite having no ideas what this difference was, I did ultimately grow up indeed to

conniving and it's milked visually at a number of points in the film, especially with Caiphas.



In contrast, and with another comment on styles of masculinity, the visual presentation of Pilate and his military general show simple authority, stressed by their dress and excellent physique. Pilate's body armor outlines his abs like an ad for some gym.



The camera angles up on the Roman leaders, who ...



..use architectural space as a way of staging their authority. The mise-en-scene's expansiveness

be different, now in ways still impossible to define. For people like me, the rise of the right with its intolerance and contempt for my idea of U.S. democratic inclusiveness is a grim and anxiety-provoking reality. In terms of my career, as a teen and young man I dreamed of and attempted — delusionally — to pursue creating high-modernist films in the tradition of Bergman, Fellini, Kubrick, et al. Now I sat in this film as an older man who had drifted into the realm of unprofitable fringe novels and screenplays for ultra-low-budget erotic horror videos that never seemed to get finished. I sat amongst the flock watching Gibson's 126-minute ordeal and felt the chill wind of threat, sensing that when the time came for the celebrants of this meat-grinder movie to compile their list, I would most likely be on it. I am one of the people who do not fit and no longer wants to.

The Passion is a right-wing testament to absolute submission to authority, and to unquestioning obedience. It's also about being a *man*, a man who knows how to take his whipping without complaint. Issues of manhood and gender are central to the film's imagery and iconography. The suffering male body is separated from the female world of nurture and pleasure and submits to the male world of brutality and pain. That's the narrative pattern of this relentless passion play. The film is terrifying. It lingers on the horrific violence visited on Christ's body. And the mental landscape behind it is literally terrified—of ambiguity, freedom, woman, pleasure. The film offers a glimpse into a hyper-masculine theocracy, which seem to lie in wait for us if the religious right ever gets social control. Since this film comes after many decades of steadily evolving *Kulturkampf*, I have found it useful to go back in time to trace the evolution of this phenomenon, which I shall briefly trace before returning to a more detailed look at Gibson's film.

Kulturkampf

In the mid-70s we witnessed the arrival and ascendancy of the Moral Majority who sought to take back the United States from forces assaulting traditional values, national moral consensus, and community cohesion. The enemy was labeled as "secular humanism." Historically, *humanism* means having values centered on principles of equality and justice which one derives from human reason. But for the Moral Majority, secular humanism refers to groups who are eroding a stable and meaningful way of life.

dramatizes this staging of Roman masculinity and power. The site of Pilate's judgments contrasts with the image seen earlier of the massed groups of Pharisees and Jews in the Temple courtyard.



This same spaciousness is seen in Pilate's apartments, where he faces a more "modernist" dilemma of leadership. He's been stuck in a provincial outpost for years, putting down rebellions.



Pilate's wife is like a stereotypical bourgeois housewife. She has nightmares. We often see her peering out a window against a dark background. Because of her gender and in spite of her class position, she is helpless although she tries to be Pilate's conscience.

And to the religious conservatives, the identity of the destructive sectors seems very clear. Problems are coming from feminists, homosexuals and other deviants, as well cultural institutions such as arts and entertainment, that is, all who might openly attack values such as respect for authority or who might dare to question venerated national or moral myths. Other targets include academics and intellectuals who probe and undermine the legitimacy of long-established authority or challenge iniquitous distributions of power and income.

The religious right's greatest *bête noir* has been the feminists, and women in general, who seem to threaten the stability of the family. Above all, the right considers the intact, heterosexual nuclear family the main way that "good" people can grow up gaining a sense of solid identity, strong moral values, and obedience to duly appointed authority. Not only does such a family ensure the continuity of life but also the validity of heterosexual relations as the only form of sexuality ratified by the divine. Many women have ought to escape the yoke of compulsory heterosexuality, rejecting having their identity determined solely by their relation to men—as wife, mother, sister, daughter, caretaker, or broodmare. Starting in the 70s, women have openly explored the parameters of their own sexuality and emotional lives as well as built a new body of feminist thought about the proper conduct and organization of society. In many ways women have developed their own sense of value as to what constitutes the primary basis of human relations. It is clear to me that one of the major animating obsessions of the fundamentalist right derives from a fear of women, ambivalence about their sexuality, and a profound insecurity about gender roles. The result is a rage around gender issues, especially around having to deal with women as equals who have the right to assert, question, and refuse to accept assigned roles.

An even more threatening ambiguity comes from the increasing visibility and social demands made by gays and bisexuals. This group presents a different threat, though one that in many respects dovetails with fundamentalist fear of women moving away from traditional roles. Homosexuality seems to result from women's attacking and undermining the emerging masculinity of young boys and even of older males, as if women were like vampires draining away the vital essence of poor hapless men. But the issue has another dimension as well: a genuine moral ambiguity that



Pilate's wife comforts him, almost like a mother to a child. The film shows women as compassionate nurturing figures, largely to male children or adults, but repeatedly pushed to the fringes of the action.



Pilate is the only character in the film who is developed with psychological depth. He is the sensitive leader, here meeting Christ for the first time and finding him innocent. This is in contrast to the historical Pilate, who was known as a particularly bloody and ruthless leader. The film presents repeated close ups of Pilate's "looks of concern."



sexual deviants represent. If God ordained two sexes with two rigidly assigned gender roles, then what's going on with queers? The right has to pose to itself the following questions about homosexuals: Is this way of life evil, plain and simple? Have homosexuals been afflicted with some spirit of pride and rebellion that causes them to seek bizarre sexual expressions simply as a provocation? If they develop or are born with such tendencies as a result of genetic endowment, intrauterine trauma or early psychological difficulties, can't they choose to repress these tendencies in order to maintain the legitimate structure of human relations and the moral order of society? Shouldn't they be willing to do this?

Beyond clinging to a goal of morally reforming the queer, fundamentalists are bedeviled by the very existence of gender ambiguity in a more profound way. Because if sexuality is random, or free-form, or subject to many vagaries, then how stable are the "absolute" givens of a reality created by God? People may not be simply right or wrong, black or white, male or female. And if we cannot be simply slotted into proper binary categories, but rather exist as beings sliding and slipping mercurially from category to category, role to role, without an absolute identity, then the universe itself is in flux and gender categories themselves called into question.

The sexuality of women, of gays and lesbians and other sexually indeterminate people are a living, breathing reminder of the possibility of some radical instability in the universe. And if the universe is unstable and random, what happens to God? I remember in the 70s how Jerry Falwell declared vehemently in a *New Yorker* interview that he objected to the traditional depictions of Christ as a soft-looking or willowy man: "Christ was a man with muscles."^[6] In retrospect, I now see how Falwell's homoerotic obsession with masculinity over twenty years ago chillingly anticipated the dynamics of Gibson's *The Passion*. For Falwell and for Gibson, a man without muscles is no man at all, and God cannot be less than a "real" man. From this point of view, you're either one or the other, and God cannot be that kind of other.

I see this link between fundamentalism and a fear of queerness as revealing the psycho-dynamics of most religious conservatives. That psychology is based on a

The general seeks to act rationally, seeing a need to forestall any potential popular rebellion. Here the close up expresses his fear and concern at the Jewish mob, egged on by the Pharisees to demand Jesus' death.



Pilate sees the scourged Jesus and despite his better judgment, he “washes his hands” of it and orders Jesus' death. Before that, he had ordered a severe beating, which he thought would be enough.

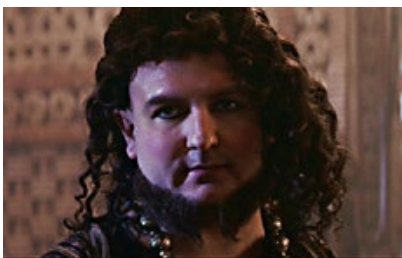
need to think in terms of either/or, to divide the world into mutually exclusive dichotomies. On one side of the dividing line are all things right and proper, on the other, the wilderness of the goats. But like many of us who live on the other side of the dividing line—and need to understand this kind of hostility since we confront it so often—I see one thing very clearly about those who must define themselves as “normal,” and thus define themselves against us: More than anything else, fundamentalists fear a potential ambiguity within themselves. They struggle mightily to repress an ambiguity within themselves, or in their families, by insisting almost hysterically on adhering to proper gender roles and sexual object choices.

The temptation and terror presented by those of us who fall outside the ordained categories can be alleviated only one way—eradicating the provoking object. Those of us on the wrong side of the culture war must be converted, transformed (with a whole host of factually and theoretically dubious therapeutic interventions) or gotten rid of. The fundamentalist needs to live in a world petrified into frozen and eternal positions. Those of us who refuse to stand still are a threat to the cosmic order—and the psychic equilibrium of those who fear that social movement or cohesiveness among sexual minorities equals collapse.

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The queer Herod



Perhaps with an historical nod to the John the Baptist and Salome story, Herod is presented as presiding over a decadent, explicitly gay court.



As he enters to meet the Pharisees, who bring Jesus for his judgment, Herod's courtiers are trying to put on his wig, but...



... it remains askew during the scene.



In this scene, as elsewhere in the film, black onlookers have an expression of sympathy for Jesus on their face.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

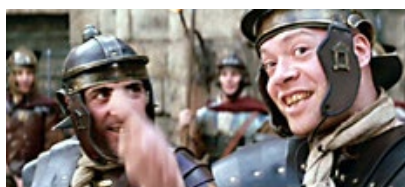
Brutal physical punishment: here, the scourging scene



Two sadistic soldiers, who will administer the punishment, here tease their superior officer. Such mock petting sets a tone of homoeroticism and occurs a number of times in the film.



Picking the rod with which to beat Jesus. Jesus is beaten with rods until he falls to the ground.



Holding back change

The amazing thing about the new crusaders is that the Christian worldview they are hell-bent on preserving has been disintegrating for hundreds of years. After the defection of Martin Luther, subsequent wars of religion had a corrosive effect on the faith of the populace, forced to swear allegiance to first one side and then the other in order to survive. The rise of science continued to undermine Christian cosmology — and with it the corresponding sanctity of the authorities that expounded or derived their power from that cosmology. In the mid-nineteenth century, in response to the encroachments of science and increasing social and cultural experimentation, fundamentalist Christianity emerged, creating a theology intended to deny the onrush of modernity. But the breakdown of traditional belief systems still continued for many people around the world.

With the arrival of Freud, the radical destabilizing of the old worldview extended to our understanding of human identity. Children were now understood as sexual beings. Furthermore, with an understanding of the unconscious, it seemed that you did was not what you truly intended, that people were not truly autonomous or rational or master of themselves. And within this shaken universe, the Nazis began their rise to power. It was they who elaborated the concept of *Kulturkampf*—Culture War—with the same words used in the rise of the religious right and its conservative political counterpart in the early 1980s. [7] In particular, one of the first acts of the Nazis was to institute “purity campaigns,” much like the current rightwing campaigns being waged today.

In a backlash against the revolutions of the 60s in the United States, a new anxiety-ridden movement has instituted its own *Kulturkampf*. Grouped together as the enemy are relativists, postmodernists, homosexuals, the sexually “liberated” and experimental, and, of course, woman who refuse to accept their place. Those who proclaim themselves the

These two sadistic guards do the beating here and continue to flog Jesus on the path to Golgotha, where they help crucify him.



Bloodlust. Spatter from Jesus' wounds fall on the torturer's face. Later his shoes and calves will be covered with that blood.



The first image of Jesus as meat. He surprises the Romans by getting to his feet again. At that point, the soldier in charge orders that...



... he be beaten with a cat o' nine tails with razors at the end.

defenders of civilization in 1990s America are similar to those of 1930s Germany. They publicly express an urgent need to stuff the genie back into the bottle and to slam the door of the cage in the faces of all of us monsters who, due to lapsed belief, skepticism and a perverse need to experiment with the self, have clawed our way out into limitless open space.

We seem to have weakened the moral fiber of the country—its masculine prowess. We seem to have made this country vulnerable to the machinations of our enemies. (And those enemies are conveniently always multiplying or replacing each other, constantly reinvented and revived, apparently eternally necessary). The making of *The Passion of the Christ* is telling in this regard, because behind the scapegoating of particular groups is this larger, ever present, pervasive, crisis of meaning going back centuries and never resolved. The conservative perspective is that if an old consensus could just be reinstituted and everyone compelled to agree on “eternal truths,” then society and its individuals could regain intellectual and spiritual equanimity, and personal and communal security. But for many of us “outsiders,” both then and now, we have no choice but to defy the resurgent remnants of the old order and of the twice-born Christians (and conservatives) who have maneuvered themselves into position of power and influence.

Brutal physical punishment

So much of the *sturm und drang* on display has the quality of masculine panic. For fundamentalist parents, control and authority in a well-disciplined society must be mirrored by a well-disciplined family. The transcendent God of the Bible must be reinvigorated, making socially tangible all his terrible Old Testament authority and dominance. For centuries, generation after generation of believing Christians have maintained the tradition of corporeal punishment of children. It seems to provide a method for establishing order and obedience in the family and by extension respect for the authorities. The history of brutal physical punishment for children shows how parents have long considered it a legitimate way to train unformed youth, shaping them into responsible and upright adults. For many adults, the Bible mandates corporeal punishment, making it morally unassailable as a mode of childrearing.

However, unassailable evidence shows that physical



The sadists get out of control.



At a certain point, the flayed Jesus is turned over so they can beat the other side of him. The same tactic is used to prolong the crucifixion scene, where after the nails have been pounded in, the whole cross is flopped over so the soldiers can pound down the points of the nails in the back so they will hold firm.



During this last phase of the beating, the images are from a skewed angle and often in slow motion, with the music up on the soundtrack.

punishment does more harm than good.^[8] It overwhelms the child physically and psychically and thus results in paranoia and anxiety. It frequently leads to criminal behavior, rather than preventing crime as its adherents claim. Childhood beating often splits the psyche into severe dissociated states, including borderline personality disorders, fugue states and even multiple personality disorders. Parents who implement corporeal punishment in childrearing often do so as a repetition of their own experiences as a child being beaten. And parents often are expressing their own desperate need to assert and maintain a sense of control both over the child and over unruly aspects of their own fragmented personalities. Those who need to subject children to brutal discipline may be redirecting their own fear and rage from their parents onto their children. These are the driving forces behind many adults' insistence on the necessity of physical punishment in childrearing.

Christian childrearing manuals also emphasize the need to break the child's will and to suppress even expressions of sadness.^[9] That is, if the child cries too long, punish him longer, until he learns to stop using tears as a form of defiance. The child should not openly show anger at what the parent has done to him. Thus, the child must learn completely to deny his real feelings, to rationalize his parent's actions as a form of love, and to subjugate his own will and sense of reality and identify with the aggressor. It is this repression that makes the good, obedient Christian child sought by the fundamentalist parents.

Many outside observers understand that such a suppression of feeling and acceptance of violence will lead to more violence later on, often in pathological and unacceptable forms. But this is almost never admitted by the rightist Christians themselves. That wife beating, child abuse, sexual abuse and rape are offshoots of this treatment are vehemently denied. The suicidal ideation described in the biographies of many well-known fundamentalist leaders throughout history^[10] is rarely acknowledged and never linked to their experience of severe brutality in childhood.

But the rage engendered by such treatment does not disappear. It must, and will, find an outlet somewhere. And the sense of endangerment, originally the sense of a child waiting for the inevitable beating from a parent, becomes the paranoia of the adult expecting attack and subversion from everyone around him, especially those



Perhaps the high point of the film's hyper-realistic representation of torture is this shot in close up, where the hooks remove a large chunk of Jesus' flesh.



If critics of the film find it "pornographic" in its beatings and blood, it is because the film's visuals recall sadomasochistic beating imagery.

who do not share his beliefs or lifestyle. Consequently, for the people of the religious right there is an almost unending profusion of enemies that have to be fought and subdued in order for a new paradise of safety and tranquility to be established.

The reaction of conservative Christians to sexual perversions, especially to male homosexuality, reveals much about what they do not acknowledge about their treatment of children, especially in light of Freud's insights about children's psychosexual development. What everyone knows from personal experience as a child, even though they may not acknowledge as an adult is that the anus is an extremely sensitive erogenous zone. For children who are punished by their parents with spankings on the buttocks, the constant pressure on the anus and contact with the buttocks during spankings, especially when coupled with the idea of parental love, arouses erotic sensations that are both powerful and usually disturbing to the child receiving the chastisement.

To many queers, it is obvious that much of the extreme homophobia expressed by the Christian right and the right in general results from an anxiety response based on their own memories of childhood spankings and their own dimly remembered pain and pleasure in the anal region. Thus what becomes taboo in defining "normal" masculinity, and even a touchstone of that "otherness" against which "real" manliness must define itself, is a buried but persistent memory of the same knowledge acknowledged as a source of sexual desire among queers.

That is, many male homosexuals receive both pain and pleasure from anal intercourse and other activities centering on the anus. Such knowledge constantly reactivates conservatives' own former childhood associations of anal pain and pleasure—and love. It is the fierce effort to suppress the conscious emergence of such memories, and thus empathy or identification with a key aspect of gay sex, that arouses such hysterical hatred against gay males.

Furthermore, in other sexual practices, consensual sexual sadomasochists, both gay and straight, men and women, self-consciously repeat, as adults, in elaborated and controlled form the discipline they were subjected to as children and deriving unabashed sexual pleasure from it. The possible turning of a biblically sanctioned form of childrearing into adult sexual practice, as a



Jesus has been turned into meat. Like a splatter film, this sequence dwells on the moment that the human is reduced to the inanimate.



This shot resembles a memorable one in Scorsese's *The Gangs of New York*, with bodies strewn and blood spattered on snow.

kind of recuperation in the arena of desire what was originally an unjust treatment of a child, is perhaps even more intolerable to the conservative Christian.

Christian child advice manuals find nothing perverse in whipping the ass of the young and helpless child. But the entire conservative populace in the United States, and probably elsewhere, acts as if everyone should be aghast and sickened by consenting adults engaging in such behavior of their own free will. It's a mindset that surely remains pre-Freud, assuming that spanking is spanking and sex is sex and never the twain must meet. For me, this reflection on the genesis and circulation of social/sexual taboos versus the contrasting sexual experiences those who challenge those taboos reveals once again that we live in an era of an ever more explicit blurring of categories. That's what the conservative mind finds so distressing. In the case of the movie *The Passion*, it is fascinating that the film dwells so much on masculinity (a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do), with an overwhelming image of the flayed male.

[Continued: *The Passion* and beating](#)

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Mary and the other women
on the sidelines



Mary Magdalene, Mary, and
John at Jesus' arrest, ...



...when Jesus is first
brought before Pilate, and



... in most of the scenes of
the film where a crowd
surrounds Jesus.
Throughout the film, the two
Marys struggle to reach the
center of the action.

The Passion and beating

Into this contemporary debate strides macho movie star Mel Gibson and his bloody Christ movie *The Passion*. Mel has outdone himself in this profession of faith heavily marketed to and by conservative Christian churches throughout the United States. In spite of this clever marketing through churches, I believe Mel is sincere in his desire to convert and to change the world—God help us if he succeeds.

Was Mel Gibson beaten as a child? The film impressed me as an elaborate reenactment of a child's experience of severe corporeal punishment. The film's imagery and narrative trajectory suggest the father as agent of punishment—but I have no way to glean accurate biographical information from the film. Most memorable in the viewing experience is this film's marathon session of the cosmic beating of a holy son's exposed body. There is also an implied complicity of the booming father in the sky, repeatedly signaled by dark clouds passing in the sky. I see this dramatic structure as reenacting a primal drama of the beaten child, forced to undergo painful, unjust blows from the parent, often with a belt or stick. In *The Passion*, this punishment is demanded by the Jewish Pharisees, portrayed with a few token exceptions as animalistic and hateful mob. The Pharisees seem more effeminate than the Roman guards. But it is the Roman guards who enact the two prolonged beating scenes, which turn out to offer as well a cinematic experience that feels like a drawn out, zestful, homoerotic rape. An analysis of these scenes showing the pleasure the Roman guards take from the beatings can be followed from considering the images accompanying this essay, especially the scourging ordered by Pilate.

I am fascinated by the use of unrelenting cinematic violence, especially direct human blows against the male body, to instill a sense of religious piety in the viewer. This seems to be the film's main dramatic tactic and purpose. Audience members are indeed emerging from this movie in tears. But is the nature of the



Flashbacks show Mary at home with Jesus.



Mary on the sidelines at the scourging: "My son, when, where, how will you choose to be delivered of this."



After the scourging, Pilate's wife comes down to give the two Marys what looks to be a shroud, but...



emotions they are feeling genuinely religious? *The Passion* presents the viewer with a parable of the ideal [male] child submitting to the will of the righteous authority figure with the ratification of the great father in the sky. This bloody film where Christ's body is tortured and bloodied for hours is a reenactment of the child's early experiences of parental punishment, and love. In its emotional force, it dramatically supports the whole brutal child-rearing ideal.

Or is it a reliving of pain and subjugation from childhood, which is then "redeemed" by being presented as a sacrificial offering of Jesus' body to his father, suffused with a spurious declaration of divine love. I don't believe I am alone in seeing this film as profoundly pathological. What makes it more disturbing is that *The Passion's* sick allegory of submission to vicious parental assault is presented with often effective, though conventional and clichéd, cinematic technique and imagery, which only make its dangerous psychopathology even more insidious and dangerous. The film resorts frequently both to the tropes of Gibson's earlier action movies and to recent fantasy movies like *Lord of the Rings*, manipulating audience with a rousing impact. This film is equal parts Fascist cinematic spectacle and religious drama. It's Mel Gibson's *Triumph of the Will*. Or at least a high-gloss updating of Cecile B. DeMille's strategy of creating blockbusters marketed as family entertainment, which combined crowd scenes, and exotic/erotic imagery coupled with brutality cloaked in religious sentiment. But unlike De Mille's biblical pageants, *The Passion* has no enticing female cheesecake on display—only straining, agonized male musculature committing or enduring violent assault.

Satan and Mary on the sidelines

Despite the film's obvious anti-semitism, in our day and age in the United States the people who are the religious right's real social targets, and subtly indicated as such in the film's narrative, are those who do not fit properly into the prescribed sexual categories. For this reason Gibson's treatment of Satan and Mary are especially interesting, even these figures are clearly on the sidelines throughout the film.

In Mary's case, the most salient aspect of Gibson's depiction—not only of her but of other positive female characters such as Mary Magdalene and another merciful female in the film—is how peripheral the

Mary uses it to clean up Jesus' blood from the courtyard.



Mary Magdalene joins her. The kinkiness of this scene provokes an eerie memory of all the relics of "Christ's blood" that might have been hawked by charlatans in the Middle Ages.



Mary pushes through the crowd and reaches Jesus' side when he first falls with the cross. She attempts to comfort him, but he is transcending her world for something higher: "See Mother, I make all things new."



women are to the main action. In fact, the film's narrative and visual structure seems deliberately to marginalize them. They are forever running around streets, standing at the backs or in the midst of crowds, peering into a courtyard, kept distant from direct participation in the action and very emphatically not empowered to intervene in any meaningful way. This is a crucial indication of the film's concept of the relation of gender to salvation.

Jesus' adult life seems to consist of his "redeeming sinners" within a world of male domination and male values, presided over by the hard-nosed male patriarch in the sky. In a fascinating way, the film depicts Jesus as entering a world of bitter rivalry and brutality. It's a harsh and uncompromising world, where all tender feeling has been suppressed if not completely extinguished. Jesus sometimes remarks at various points in the film that he is willing himself to carry through on this mandate to die for man's sins and to obey the law of the father. The film clearly shows that his adult mission means leaving the world of loving kindness and physical contact, represented by the flashbacks of Mary with her son behind, and sacrificing himself to the authoritarian world of male violence. To me, the film's narrative is clearly symbolic of a primal, conservative scene. Here, the male child must separate himself from the world of the mother, from females, from love and acceptance of the body.

To embrace the task of his manhood, he must subject himself to the rule of men, which ostensibly represents a realm of order and the transcendent God. What is interesting in this film is how clearly the script and visuals set out that in accepting this role, he in fact submits to an alternative regime in regards to the body. The film gives Christ no intellectual or psychological complexity but indicates that his manly task is to submit to the earthly masters' realm of inflicting pain and that his strength must consist of maintaining the fortitude to complete this task, under total obedience to the insane demands of the authoritarian male-on-high. Visually, the film presents this man's suffering as something like a primitive tribal ritual, where the pubescent male is separated from the females, isolated, and then subjected to ordeals of physical pain and mutilation in order symbolically to be reborn into the male realm of pride and autonomy.

In *The Passion*, women, as exemplified by Mary, are reduced to watching and empathizing from the

When Mary sees Jesus fall, a flashback, presumably her memory, shows when he fell as a child and she came to his aid. "I'm here," she cried, just as she did when she comes to him fallen by the cross. This image also reiterates the "feminine" world of pleasant bodily contact, compassion and love that Christ is leaving behind to undergo his ordeal at the hands of and possible entry into the harsh world of masculine order.



A compassionate woman comforts the fallen Jesus, wiping his blood from his face with her scarf. After Christ is brutally torn away from her, he looks at her longingly as he passes.



She is left on the sidelines, looking on helplessly. Once again, the nurturing female is simultaneously longed for and superceded.

sidelines and performing acts of tenderness after the fact—like wiping up Jesus' blood off the tiles of the courtyard after his flogging. Without meaning to, Mel's movie has perhaps created the strongest argument yet seen for a return to matriarchy and a society where feminine values predominate. I can imagine a young Mel in his childhood perhaps separated from his mother in order to be initiated into the male order of hierarchy, command and control. Perhaps his mother was a longed-for figure, glimpsed at distance, who no longer had a significant role to play. I can imagine she is a figure that in the depths of his mind Mel secretly wishes to return to. For me, these Freudian musings on the religious right and the results of punitive childhood discipline only render the ideology promulgated by *The Passion* more tragic.

The film enacts the rejection of the feminine, its relegation to the margins as Jesus, the masochistic hero, surrenders to the male order of pain and forbearance. Even the thief who supposedly will join Christ in Paradise proclaims Christ's innocence and the injustice of His punishment. And that thief is like the other sibling getting punished, contrasting Christ's situation to his; like a good boy, contrite and tearful and masochistic, he admits that he deserves his sentence and accepts the brutal punishment meted out to him by the authorities. The bad thief is shown raging and mocking and is repaid for his defiance by a crow pecking at his eye. The Father's response: don't question authority or the righteousness thereof or you'll get another taste of the same medicine. The sibling's response, that is, the response of the viewer, let's see the really bad brother get the worst beating. Nothing like that crow eating out the bad thief's eye, of course, occurs in any of the four Gospels.

Indeed much of what occurs in the film, and some of its most symbolically telling moments, lie outside the Biblical narrative of the "passion." I find that curious for a film that promotes itself as the most authentic Biblical film ever made. Gibson and his screenwriter apparently feel as free to manipulate Scripture, while claiming absolute fidelity to it, as some of our better-known televangelists have long done for the sake of a good television show. In *The Passion* these added incidents underline the lesson of stoic, manly submission—with women relegated to the sidelines.

Interestingly Mary is not the only figure at the sidelines. A parallel figure, dressed in black like Mary,

Satan, also on the sidelines



The androgyne Satan says to Christ in Gethsemene, "Do you really believe that one man can bear the burden of sin. ... Saving their souls is far too costly." A snake slithers from under Satan's skirt, indicating that evil comes from his/her ambiguous genitalia, ever the site of patriarchal anxiety.



Satan appears in the crowd at the scourging, ...



... appearing much as the two Marys do, ...

also follows along Christ's path much like Mary does. The character of Mary, usually accompanied by Mary Magdalene, has a narrative counterpart. That figure is linked to her throughout both in terms of visual similarities, narrative structure and placement in the mise-en-scene. The character of Satan watches Christ's great sacrifice with what appears to be simultaneous hope that Christ will fail at this task and a certain degree of relish at the pain Christ suffers.

Clearly, the most salient feature of this character is its sexual ambiguity. The film presents Satan as an androgyne of no fixed gender. It is hard to tell whether Satan is an effeminate male or a masculine woman. That figure's depiction thus tellingly represents the fundamentalist "demonic" in microcosm. This enemy incarnate, that is, made flesh, becomes visible to the audience as a creature that refuses proper gender definition, one way or the other. Satan so much mirrors Mary, that in one scene the devil carries a baby, a parallel to the infant Jesus, no doubt signifying the future anti-Christ. And that baby is a hideous hairy child with a deformed face.

Conservative anxiety over sexual roles and possible sexual feelings is palpable here. The visual depiction of Satan, especially as this memorable bad mother and child, clearly delineate fundamentalist ambivalence toward women and its dividing of them between the negative and monstrous mother figure and the positive mother figure, largely sexless and obedient. Historically, interpretations of the Bible could easily find women the weaker vessel, more sensual, less rational, more subject to the blandishments of the demonic, and in turn tempters of men, leading God's sons to weakness and perdition. The feminine is dangerous. It all started with Eve and the snake (!) and Adam's fall.

The film's brief treatment of a campy Herod, wearing eye makeup and an askew black curly wig, typically expresses a male rightist's sexual anxieties about gay campiness. Herod sees that Jesus has already been flogged and chooses not to crucify Jesus. By implication, as a sissy, Herod fails to fulfill his role, fails to be a real man. His deviant sexuality renders him incapable of acting with authority.

In *The Passion* no positive depiction of sexuality or of the body is possible. This is not just because the story's scope can't encompass such a scene but just as much

because Mel's mental world won't allow it. There is no positive life of the body in Mel's world. The body is a crucible of suffering, or of weakness giving way to temptations—a trial to be endured. I shall return to the primacy of the body in Gibson's film later in a discussion of splatter films and pornography.

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... and parodying the iconography of Mary, Mother of Christ, by ...



... carrying a devil child.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Hyper-reality, computer-generated imagery (CGI) and the supernatural.

Devilish children



Children persecute Judas
and hound him into the hills
to his death. This child ...



... visually changes into this
demon...



... as does another child
harassing Judas. These
images indicate a
repressed rage toward

To me, the film depicts children in a way symbolically parallel to its treatment of Mary and Satan. Children persecute the betrayer Judas and hound him to his death. Their faces distort into monstrosity. They look like demonic dwarves, hounding Judas into the hills where he will ultimately hang himself. Except for the largely invented scenes of the child Jesus, the film shows no positive representations of children. Given my interpretation of all the physical scourging in the film, I have to wonder if the sudden eruption of these grotesque “devil child” figures subconsciously express the taboo rage that the beaten child feels against his betrayer, and which the adult version of that child cannot face. In this film, I see that kind of rage most clearly channeled into a religiously sanctioned presentation which defuses the rage’s true meaning.

And if one is an adult fundamentalist full of such neurosis and repressed rage, then the film could also be presenting in these strange scenes how Mel and his fundamentalist comrades perceive children, or their dimly perceived understanding of their own children’s rage against them that matches their adult selves’ unacknowledged emotions, that heavy legacy of unjust treatment from their own childhood. The film’s grotesque children, these wild demonic creatures that must be subjugated, their demonic natures tamed—by any means necessary, represent fundamentalist ferocity turned against the body, especially against the child. It is a wildly hallucinatory and ugly world.

Interestingly, the closer Christ on the cross gets to death, the more his body is painted by CGI and the more supernatural events occur, such as the spray of blood coming from his side raining down on a Roman guard, converting the guard. The film strangely has a way of presenting the supernatural, the transcendental, in imagery that is pointedly hallucinatory. Many of the

children, and toward the id - the child in the adult - as demons needing to be tamed or suppressed.



The children hound Judas into the hills ...



... accompanied by Satan ...



... until Judas falls by the carcass of a maggoty dead mule, from which he takes the halter and hangs himself. The images that linger on the maggots make this film philosophically and visually kin to the splatter film.

scenes representing the supernatural have a quality of primal unreality. While the flaying of Christ's body is presented in terms of grotesque hyper-reality, especially the first extended flogging scene, the "spiritual" is lit and staged like a madman's nightmare. It led me to wonder whether or not deep down Mel personally doubts the reality of the grand supernatural story he is telling. For in this film, the body seems to be all.

A splatter film

The Passion has such an emphasis on blood and the body, it seems to fit well in the tradition of the splatter film, but here in a high brow rendition of this low culture dramatic form. The body became the obsessive focus of a new kind of cinema that emerged in the 1960's, a new cinema with two divergent manifestations: the splatter film and the porno movie. The appeal of this new cinema lay primarily in its capacity to evoke bodily sensations.

The splatter film can be viewed as just another form of lowbrow and vulgar popular entertainment lacking in any kind of serious dimension. But the truth is the splatter film represents something significant: the collapse of any genuine belief in a transcendent reality beyond the physical existence experienced in the here and now. Splatter films display a morbid, anxious fascination with the vulnerability of the body. They dwell on the fact that if you puncture the body here or rip it there, the consciousness inside it ceases to exist. Splatter films dwell on the moment that the human being is reduced to mere inanimate—and in some cases—completely disorganized matter. This genre functions psychologically as a kind of cinematic Fort/Da game. The chief cause of anxiety gets rehearsed again and again, obsessively hoping for an eventual mastery of the fear that's engendered by a realization that the body and its functions are all there is.[\[11\]](#)

Over the long course of the history of the arts, a gradual generic split, tied to class, money and cultural divisions, let the high arts emphasize good taste, refinement and intellectual complexity, and the low arts appeal to raw emotionalism, anxiety, fear, and sexual arousal. The vulgar genres gained force and popularity in the twentieth century with declining consensus in faith about the universe and its meaning, and with the growing literacy of the masses. Bourgeois culture and the high art it maintained, with its



The feet of the hanged Judas dangle with the rotting animal behind them, linking corruption, animal nature, and death.

Blood, the crucifixion, CGI, and splatter



The crown of thorns is forced down on Christ's head with such relish, it exceeds that of many splatter films.



Jesus embraces his cross with masochistic, almost erotic, fervor.

emphasis on the ethereal and cerebral, was founded on an emphatic denial of the body and its functions. High art sublimates themes about bodily impulses onto a spiritual level, which is then profoundly threatened by the needs and possible degradations of gross matter. When transcendent beliefs no longer could gain overall consensus, that old subordination of genres dealing with physical sensation declined.

The body, in both its sexual aspect and as our intimate, fragile, physical manifestation of life vulnerable to death—especially death of the premature and violent variety—has become the chief object of gore and porno filmmaking, with their admixture of pleasure, dread and ambivalence. In contrast to splatter, the porno film is a constantly reiterated visualization obsessively showing the body as source of pleasure, pleasure comprised of an orgasmic intensity that much of its audience are not (*pace* Reich: no longer?) capable of. Obviously depictions of sexual pleasure or the delectation of the nude female body are out of bounds for a film of and for the Christian right. Instead we are presented with a naked male body violated and damaged for over two hours.

The Passion may be the ultimate splatter movie. It concentrates obsessively on the rending of Christ's tender flesh and of his self-willed ability to take it. We see chunks ripped out of his side by the scourge, and his crown of thorns jammed into the flesh above his eye with blood pouring down his face. To me, the film's emphatic tone on flaying and the hyperactive push given the film by its supporters seem a desperate defense against a layer of subconscious doubt about there being anything above the body and its suffering, something that could enable the regulation of the body's messy and potentially out-of-control processes.

Salvation from the body, as seen in this film, could only come through the saving grace of absolute submission to external authority, by implication divine male control. The supernatural elements seem so unreal because deep down the film cannot convey that the supernatural is real. All the film can show for certain is the physical self reduced to a bloody mess and hung up like a side of beef. Thus the film's grim inventory of injury and pain encapsulates the religious right's hysteria, and perhaps even crisis of faith.



Jesus' eye, in close up, iconically stands out. The image is repeated several times. The camera moves vertiginously each time it cuts to Jesus' POV after this shot, reminiscent of horror director Dario Argento's surreal imagery.



Jesus falls to the ground in painful slow motion, the first of many slow motion falls that occur throughout the film. With repetition, this action takes on the quality of some kind of ritualistic act lovingly repeated.



The nail is driven into the palm with hyper-realistic detail, including the spurting of blood. Blood is so emphasized, with attention paid to almost every drip, that the visual concentration on it has a fetishistic quality.

Such a terror and anxiety can become strict believer's overriding reality. If God does not exist, then the body is all there is and life has no inherent meaning. Belief in a transcendent principle must be maintained by a desperate act of will. The dilemma is there are other people out there who act as if God does not exist, who allow themselves to indulge desires of the flesh that are not countenanced by the traditionally religious, who stray from the codes of personal behavior mandated by the Bible. According to the logic I have traced, aren't these people calling the whole fragile structure of belief into question by their very existence, by their very refusal to conform or submit? Don't they threaten the self-control and equanimity of the faithful just by the simple fact of attempting to live their lives according to their own sense of reality and their own desires?

The need to define us as the Other

Ultimately, the presence of people living another kind of life on the wrong side of the culture war creates a constant anxiety and provocation to religious conservatives, no matter how reasonable and non-confrontational the "deviants'" behavior might be. This is because the mere existence of these people and their refusal to alter their behavior calls the whole fundamentalist cosmology into question. And worse, if the Others become belligerent or refuse to be invisible, then conservative anger is even greater. No matter how much we might want to tolerate the right and let them be—let them have their own films, live and let live—they are not content with that. We might be willing to let them alone, but the same is not true for them. We are a thorn in their side, our existence constantly posing a question that agitates their minds. Reality is most comfortable when it can be assumed and taken for granted. And that can't happen with the wrong people around.

It is not the Jews in the next few years who will be the main focus of the fundamentalist anxiety and rage. It will be the people who most emphatically embody ambiguity and refuse to stay within proscribed boundaries: the sexually different, the homosexual, the experimental, and the sado-masochistic. They do more than threaten to dredge up ambivalent emotions from childhood experiences and repressed desires that can't be accepted at any costs. They threaten an entire worldview. The culture war will encompass all of us, liberals and skeptics and intellectuals—but the hammer

will fall most resoundingly on sexually Other.

The Passion ends with no explicit promise of revenge. But revenge is always in the offing in the universe of Mel Gibson's films. And considering the intensity of demonic imagery and aggression on display here, I can imagine the next film, Mel Gibson's APOCALYPSE. In this film all the bad people will get what is coming to them in the same graphic and horrendous terms depicted in *The Passion of the Christ*. Here's the promo for *The Passion 2: Apocalypse*: "Last time they put the hurt on the Lamb of God. Now he's back. And this time it's payback." Lines will wrap around the block. It's a shoo-in.

For those of us who think of ourselves as new wine that does not want to be forced back into old bottles, fundamentalist ideology counters with a demand for a return to a set of shared and obligatory beliefs, behaviors and roles. This desperation to forge social unanimity became especially strong in the wake of the divisive conflicts of the 1960s—with its defiance of authority and established values; and with the defeat in Vietnam and the doubt it cast on the righteousness of the U.S. mission in the world. In the last few decades, many people have felt a sense of malaise and uncertainty, of existential vertigo, which cries out for a container, something to constrain the dizzy spirit and help it right itself. For many Americans the answer to this sense of "borderlessness" has been a return to traditional Christianity and for some, the attendant and rather fanatical insistence that everybody else should return to it with them. But many of us have fought for sexual liberation, for liberation from coercive and authoritarian modes of child-rearing, for freedom to express our sexual difference in terms of object-choice and to freely explore reality on our own terms. We have no inclination to climb back into an old cage.

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The nailing to the cross is prolonged by turning the cross, with Jesus on it, forcefully over twice, before it is hoisted.



The good thief ...



... and the bad thief, whose eye is plucked out by a crow.



Blood at the base of the

cross. No detail of
bloodshed is omitted.



By the time Jesus dies, his
wounds no longer look
realistic but painted.



CGI blood spouts out and
pours down like rain when
Christ's side is pierced with
a lance. The rain of blood
falls on a soldier below,
converting him.



The pieta when Mary holds
Jesus taken down from the
cross. She stares directly
and accusingly at the
audience, as if challenging
them to do something, to
make her son's suffering
meaningful, to assure his
victory. But her power is
kept symbolic and abstract:

maternal love, chastity, obedience. Women who exist completely in their flesh and have agency have no role in this story.



Unlike the Biblical narrative, the film does not show the Marys at the empty tomb with an angel announcing the resurrection. Instead the film surprisingly ends with an image of the risen Christ in the tomb.



In the film's final image, the camera pans down from Christ's contemplative face past the hand with a hole in it to these naked things striding out frame right. Fade to black and then up on Mel Gibson's credit. It's a surprisingly overt, homoerotic, visual conclusion to the film.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

1. A representative selection of such manuals includes: *God, the Rod, and your Child's Bod*, Larry Tomzak (Old Tappen NJ 1972); *Spanking: Why, When and How*, Roy Lessin (1979); *What the Bible Says About...Child Training*, Richard Fugate (1980); *Dare to Discipline* (1970) and *The Strong-Willed Child* (1978) both by James Dobson, founder and head of Focus on the Family. All the above and numerous others are analyzed by Philip Greven in *Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse* (Vintage Books 1992)

2. Greven, *Spare the Child*.

3. "Passion no. 1 at Box Office," CNN,
<http://www.cnn.com/2004/SHOWBIZ/Movies/02/29/box.office.reut/>

The leader of the church group I surreptitiously saw the film with was equipped with free tickets, glossy pamphlets and discussion guides. You can now purchase "beautifully" reproduced images from *The Passion* website in multi-packs. Ca-Ching!

4. "The Backlash *Passion*: A Messianic Meller for our Time," Richard Goldstein, *The Village Voice*, February 25-March 2, 2004
<http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0408/goldstein.php>

5. Ibid.

6. "A Disciplined, Charging Army," Francis Fitzgerald, Reporter At Large, *The New Yorker*, May 18, 1981, p. 53-141.

7. To study the parallels between the *Kulturkampf* and today's culture wars I recommend several books that analyze Austrian culture during and after World War I and the decline and fall of the Hapsburg Dynasty: *Fin-De-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, Carl E Schorske (Vintage Books 1981); *Modernity and the Crisis of Identity: Culture and Identity in Fin-De-Seicle Vienna*, Jacques Le Ryder (New York: Continuum 1993); *Subject Without Nations—Robert Musil and the History of Modern Identity*, Stefan Jonsson (Durham: Duke University Press 2001)

Of special relevance is *Otto Weininger: Sex, Science and Self in Imperial Vienna* by Chandak Sengoopta (University of Chicago Press

2000). Sengoopta analyzes Weininger and his theories of innate bisexuality, female sensuality, and animal-nature with its attendant lack of soul. He applies these theories to Jews and homosexuals as effeminate and degenerated; Weininger was himself a Jew who committed suicide at the age of 23. His ideas had wide currency within the German-speaking world and beyond.

Crises of meaning, gender and identity evolved and grew more intense in the anxiety-ridden and florid inter-war years of Weimar Germany, centered especially in Berlin. See: *Before the Deluge: A Portrait of Berlin in the 1920's* by Otto Friedrich (New York: Harper Perennial 1995); *Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity: Film, Literature, and "New Objectivity"*, Richard W. McCormick (New York: Palgrave 2001); *Male Fantasies, volume 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, Klaus Theweleit (University of Minnesota Press 1987); *Male Fantasies, volume 2: Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*, Klaus Theweleit (University of Minnesota Press Minneapolis 1989). Both of Theweleit's books record and examine men's dreams and fantasies in the years leading up to World War II, particularly of members of the German Freikorps, a right-wing militia group.

Voluptuous Panic: The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin by Mel Gordon (Feral House Venice CA 2000) is a profusely illustrated treatment of lesbian and gay cabaret, night clubs and magazines as well as venues and material catering to a wide variety of sexual variations. Also of crucial interest is Lloyd de Mause's *The Psychic Life of Nations* from which I derive the idea of "psycho-classes." This book is downloadable from the Institute of Psychohistory website.

And finally, in *The Gorgon's Gaze: German Cinema, Expressionism and the Image of Horror* (Cambridge University Press UK 1991), Paul Coates distills all of the cultural currents noted above and examines their depiction in the form and iconography of German Expressionist Cinema.

[8.](#) Greven, *Spare the Child*. See also *Beating the Devil out of Them: Corporal Punishment in American Families and its Effects on Children*, Murray A. Straus and Denise A. Donnelly (NY Transaction Publishers 2001). The work of Alice Miller is of signal importance: see *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, revised and updated, 1998); *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Childhood and the Roots of Violence* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1983); and *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1998). *Child Abuse Trauma: Theory and Treatment of the Lasting Effects*, John Briere (Sage 1992); *Soul Murder: The Effects of Childhood Abuse and Degradation* by Leonard Shengold (Ballantine Books 1991).

Greven provides a list of studies, articles and books detailing the psychological consequences of corporeal punishment too numerous to list here (p. 235-247). Straus and Donnelly's book is more recent and provides an equally abundant wealth of evidence of the negative effects of corporeal punishment and its effects on later personality

development, adolescent and adult behavior.

9. Dobson is quoted to this effect in Greven. Similar views are expressed by Christian child rearing expert Larry Christenson in the same section of the same chapter as Dobson (Rationales: Breaking Wills)

10. *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather*, Kenneth Silverman (Harper and Row 1984); *A Portrait of Isaac Newton*, Frank E. Manuel (Belknap Press of Harvard University 1968); *George Whitfield: Wayfaring Witness*, Stuart C. Henry (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press 1957); *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History*, Erik H. Erickson (W.W. Norton & Co. 1958); *My Father: An Intimate Portrait of Dwight Moody*, Paul Moody (Little Brown and Company, 1938).

11. On splatter movies, *Breaking the Last Taboo: A Critical Survey of the Wildly Demented Sub-Genre of the Horror Film that is Changing the Face of Film Realism Forever* (Fanataco Enterprises 1981); *A Taste For Blood: The Films of Herschel Gordon Lewis*, Christopher Wayne Curry (UK: Creation Books, 1999)

On the porno movie, interesting histories and critical assessments include *Babylon Blue: An Illustrated History of Adult Cinema*, David Flint (UK: Creation Books 1998); *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Pleasure in America*, Laura Kipnis (Durham NC: Duke University Press 1999)

On the importance of the body in recent film, both underground and mainstream, see *Bad Girls, Sick Boys: Fantasies in Contemporary Art and Culture*, Laura S. Kauffman (University of California Press 1998).

Feminist performance artists have also made an extreme emphasis on the (female) body the core of their aesthetic but with a radically different intent, which includes the transgressive undermining of the symbolic order and with it the complex of ideas associated with artistic production, high versus low culture etc. The female body confronts the spectator with the stark reality of female physicality itself. Excellent studies include *The Explicit Body in Performance*, Rebecca Schneider (Routledge 1997) and *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Amelia Jones (University of Minnesota Press 1998).

The work of Annie Sprinkle draws an interesting line between pornography and performance art. For an outline of her career read the very entertaining *Post-porn Modernist: My Twenty-five Years as a Multi-Media Whore* (San Francisco: Clies Press 1998).

The work of the German film director Jorg Buttgereit combines iconography from both pornography and splatter cinema as well as avant-garde film practice in his notorious *Nekromantik* films and most successfully realized in *Schramm* (1991). These films are incisively analyzed by David Kerekes in his *Sex Murder Art: The Films of Jorg Buttgereit* (Head Press: Great Britain 1994).

The work of the contemporary ultra-low budget shot-on-video director Eric Stanze also combines graphic violence and sexuality in such films as *I Spit on Your Corpse*, *I Piss on Your Grave*; *Scrapbook*; and *China White Serpentine*. As different as the genres and art practices listed above are they all share an intensive focus on the visceral experience of the embodied human being. What is interesting about Gibson's film is how it is simultaneously just as emphatic in its concentration on bodily experience and yet denies this primacy by reference to the spiritual and supernatural; the spirituality of the film seems spurious—unreal and incredible—considering the film's relentless imagery and tone.

I would like to thank Lloyd de Mause and Michael Christopher for encouraging and seconding my initial observations and interest in the issues presented by this film. Thanks as well to Charles B. Strozier and Professor Steven Shaviro of the University of Washington for offering useful comments on the first draft.

The S & M illustration in the essay is from Mel Gordon's *Voluptuous Panic*, and is used with the kind permission of Mel Gordon and Adam Parfrey, editor Feral House books.

My greatest gratitude goes to Julia Lesage, whose editing, indeed contributions to this essay are immeasurable, as are her patience and forbearance. She truly has my heartfelt admiration.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Bibliography on class in film and media studies

by [Terri Ginsberg](#), [Chuck Kleinhans](#), and
[Dennis Broe](#)

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Editors' note: This bibliography was compiled by members of the Society for Film and Media Studies Caucus on Class. The caucus has a useful web site, including many related web links. See <http://terri1.home.mindspring.com>

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

China, broadly conceived

Review of Sheldon H. Lu, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. 321pp.

by David Leiwei Li



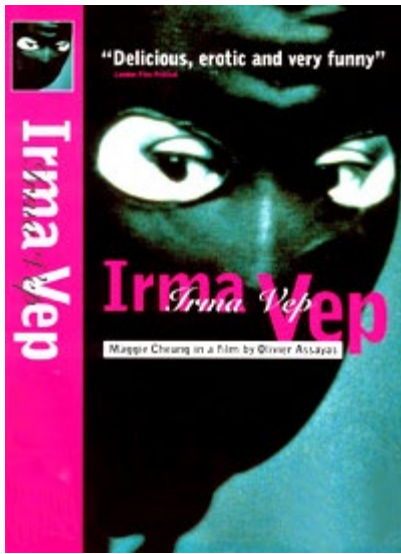
Lu examines the “globalization of the Hong Kong action heroine,” with a special focus on Anita Mui,...



... Michelle Yeoh...

Sheldon Lu's is an elegant and succinct book that charts the cultural production of contemporary China in the closing decade of the last millennium. It enters the dynamic scholarly discourse on “China,” broadly conceived, with its own distinctive voice. One thinks immediately of a host of recent volumes with which Lu's contribution will inevitably be associated. Xiaobing Tang's *Chinese Modern: the Heroic and the Quotidian* (Duke University Press, 2000) zeroes in on canonical Chinese literary texts of the twentieth century with excursions to urban culture and interior design. Yingjin Zhang's *Screening China* (University of Michigan, 2002) intertwines the various Sino-cinemas for scrutiny and intervenes in the formation of a transnational imaginary. Dai Jinhua's *Cinema and Desire* (edited and translated from Chinese by Jing Wang and Tani Barlow et al, Verso, 2002. See review in *Jump Cut* 46 by Gina Marchetti) engages the Fifth and Sixth generations of mainland filmmakers and television production of the 1990s. Besides sharing the thematic preoccupations of these works, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity* is a singular authorial effort that attempts to “reimagine,” to borrow the title of the editorial project led by Rey Chow, *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory* (Duke University Press, 2000).

Appropriately, the book is structured in the form of a quartet, four parts and eleven chapters with specific generic emphases—from cinema to television, soap opera to pop novel, museum display to earth art—all framed by an overarching concern with the role of cultural theory and the agency of Chinese intellectuals



... and Maggie Cheung.



Ermo is a film about a peasant woman who works and schemes to get a large TV set. Lu sees this story as a metaphor for China's entry into a global economy and for television's mediating desire on an international scale.

in mind. The objective is to capture not so much “the global position of China in political and economic terms,” but its “much more nebulous and intangible” “cultural dimensions” (1). To put it in a slightly different fashion, Lu seems to have made his case that the contemporary importance of China in the world is not apparent unless we see it mediated in visual culture.

In fact, the book's primary attention to the production of visibility and its relative neglect of literary texts bespeak an intriguing shift. On the one hand, the decline in significance of the literary betrays the waning centrality both of the word in print and the Confucian scholar/poet that sustained China from antiquity to modernity. On the other hand, the enthusiastic participation in technologies of simulation, perhaps more than its imminent admission into the WTO, marks China's undeniable entry in the global circuit of image production, the hallmark of postmodernity as is commonly known.

To tackle this shift, amid China's disjunctive “socialist politics and capitalist economics” (4), Lu takes up the ambitious task of periodization while sorting out the claims of “postmodernity” on the different sides of the Pacific Rim (4-11):

One cannot periodize historical processes neatly in the Chinese case, and there is no clear temporal pattern for the successive states of the ancient world, modernity, and postmodernity, as in the West. Contemporary China consists of multiple temporalities superimposed on one another; the pre-modern, the modern, and the postmodern coexist in the same space and at the same moment. Paradoxically, postmodernism in China is even more “spatial” and more “postmodern” than its original Western model. Spatial co-extension, rather than temporal succession, defines non-Western postmodernity. Hybridity, unevenness, nonsynchronicity, and pastiche are the main features of Chinese postmodern culture. (13)

Having located the mixed mode of Chinese cultural production, its temporal warping and spatial unevenness exemplary of many developing or third world nation-states in our time, Lu launches an extensive discussion of the various competing discourses behind China's global visibility.

Part I, "Theory, Criticism, Intellectual History," consists of three interrelated chapters that at once trace the discursive cacophony of the 1980s and 1990s and lay ground for an analyses and appreciation of the actual creative products that the rest of the book deals with. Lu's examination of the period's cultural dialogue is multiple and meticulous. For the sake of synopsis, we can see it as a threefold engagement, of Euro-American theory of postmodernity and postcoloniality, of myriad mainland Chinese negotiation of the "post-isms," and of a trans-Pacific diasporic production of "Chineseness."

Although mainland China remains the focus of his study, Lu has made it clear that China is no longer a closed space of cultural sovereignty and its representation and self-articulation are ineluctably embedded in the global and local traffic of meaning. Lu differentiates Chinese postmodernisms of the 1980s and 1990s, between the former "as a philosophy and a style of thought" uncorroborated by socioeconomic conditions and the latter as a "cultural force" behind the heels of a "full-fledged [Chinese] reality" of consumer capitalism (65-66). He faults postcolonial theory's omission of the Chinese historical distinction, and follows Aihwa Ong's suggestion to envision a "*post* postcolonial era in a post-cold war order of flexible capital" (61, 63). And he expresses ambivalence about the revival of neo-Confucianism as an Asian agency resistant to Eurocentrism and as an undesirable form of Sinocentrism (69).

[Continued](#)

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



In discussing Hong Kong cinema, Lu works out Aihwa Ong's concept of flexible citizenship, in reference both to immigration and to those who reside in various countries and cultures. He deals here with Peter Chan's *Almost a Love Story*, ...



What is salient in this medley of debates is the basic tension that Lu has excavated. If the pre-modern, the modern, and the postmodern coexist in contemporary China, this mixed mode of production is most evident in the ideological contradiction of the Chinese intellectuals as a collectivity. There is a yearning of modernity, as pronounced in the Enlightenment ideals yet devoid of its historical negativity. Advocates of this school would argue for the development of rationality and democracy to ward off a return to pre-modern tradition (58-59). On the other end of the spectrum, however, is the contrary yearning of postmodernity, of the “possibilities of difference, alterity, multiplicity and heterogeneity” (68).

This set of contradictory yearnings is most recently played out, as Lu has made us aware, in the rivalry between “liberalism” and the “New Left” (81-83). But liberalism’s not so secret alliance with possessive individualism and the emerging Chinese middle class and the New Left’s critique of it in favor of Marxist class analyses are caught in the same trap. Neither can realistically access the relative autonomy of social collectivities, be it family, class, or nation-states. Late capital has altered the nature of the nation-state, be it state communism or state capitalism, and it has altered the state of human solidarity with the promise of endless individual mobility. This is indeed the challenge of globalization, the challenge of imagining the social when the social as we know historically is almost in ruins. Although capital undermines the totalitarian authority of the Chinese state, the state’s collusion with capital clearly undermines the possibility of democracy. This is as much a Chinese problem as it is a worldwide phenomenon.^[1] The contradiction Lu has followed with much rigor finally reveals an unprecedented crisis of legitimacy for Chinese intellectuals, who are forced to renegotiate their role “under combined pressures from the market, the state, and TNCs” (85, 84).

In many ways, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity* is a diasporic Chinese intellectual’s

... Wong Kar-Wai's *Happy Together*, ...



... Clara Law's *Farewell China*...



... and Stanley Kwan's *Full Moon in New York*.

conscientious mediation of China's cultural production in the 1990s, unleashed by the dynamic force of capital. It intends to "analyze closely how processes of large-scale globalization" "are mediated, reflected, or resisted in actual texts of art through both the traditional medium (avant-garde art and writing) and the mass media (film and TV)" (26). Part II, "Cinema," begins with an allegorical reading of a fifth generation Chinese director's film, *Ermo* [originally published in *Jump Cut* 42, 1998, co-author Anne T. Ciecko]. The story of a peasant woman acquiring the biggest TV in her county has become a metaphor both for China's arrival at the "global village" and for the release of a "libidinal economy" (89, 94). Televisuality thus mediates desire beyond the confines of the local just as films consciously traversing territorial boundaries intimate "a process of decontextualization and recontextualization of citizenship, nationality, and residence" (108).

In an intriguing reading of a host of Hong Kong films—from Peter Chan (Chan Ho San)'s *Comrades, Almost a Love Story*, Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together*, to Clara Law's *Farewell China* and Stanley Kwan's *Full Moon in New York*—Lu teases out Ong's notion of "flexible citizenship," and the limits and liberty of multiple belongings. This look of Hong Kong as the nodal point of migration is followed by "the globalization of the Hong Kong action heroine," a chapter that examines the trio of Anita Mui, Maggie Cheung and Michelle Yeoh in the transnational nexus of film production, exhibition, distribution and reception (122-38).

If we concur with Fredric Jameson that global postmodernity is "the becoming cultural of the economic, and the becoming economic of the cultural," Lu has shown the complex negotiations of the cultural and economic in the import and export business of Chinese visuality.^[2] The coupling of the economic and the cultural is true of Chinese art cinema in international film festivals, as is Chinese pop-icon's incorporation into Hollywood. Indeed, one cannot imagine the survival of Chinese experimental art, if not for the financial backings of overseas museums and markets. The relation between indigenous art production and transnational funding therefore constitutes the critical core of Part III "Avant-Guard Art." Lu asks, "what is at stake, then, for the artist when art itself is a commodity, like a 'high-quality good' or a 'fast food'" (142)? Here, he seems to favor certain genres over others: "installation art," for

example, is privileged over “political Pop” because the former is “uncollectable, uncommercial, and nonlucrative” (158).

While one may agree in principle that the dismantling of “art-as-precious-objects” represents possibilities of resistance, the production of “ephemeral situations” is also consistent with the built-in obsolescence of postmodern commodity culture (159). Whether or not artistic production is able to retain its radical potential when it is part of the transnational commerce in spectacles is at the heart of the discussion. In a chapter called “the uses of China,” Lu scrutinizes the various strategies of staging “Chineseness”—harking back to the theoretical debate and cinematic construction of “Cultural China”—that range from the deployment of hyperbole and parody to the deliberate erasure of stylistic distinction.

The book concludes in Part IV with extensive analyses of popular cultural media, of soap opera, rock and roll, and TV serials, of pop-novels, and serious literary endeavors with apparent pop appeal. Lu writes perceptively of the rise of the pop and its important impact, among them, the dwindling influence of the state, the diminishing significance of intellectuals as figures of “cultural autocracy,” the liberation of mass sentiment and the subversion of official ideologies (206). The phenomenon of “China Pop,” not accidentally, coincides with the introduction of market economy in China and a new Chinese awareness of the global cultural market. Lu offers a very informative account of the influence of the West, the infusion of Hong Kong and Taiwan cultural forms, and mainland China’s negotiation of its own centrality.

Globalization and localization happen simultaneously as the competition in the capital market is mirrored in the rivalry of libidinal economy. Lu’s take of “the transnational politics of sexuality and masculinity in the Chinese media” is full of serious criticism as well as a wry sense of humor. Against a prevailing Euro-American reading of those TV texts as mere expressions of resurgent “nationalism,” Lu situates the question of Chinese masculinity in the complex exchange of indigenous and foreign women and treats it as a complex exploration of “national identity” in an increasingly “transnational, deterritorialized global economy” (238).

Such attention to the multidimensionality of cultural

production, everywhere evident in *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity*, has made it a particularly engaging piece of scholarship. Comprehensive in his mapping, erudite in his assessment, rigorous in his method, Lu has offered an intellectual forum in the international context where the plethora of images and ideas about China across the Pacific Rim has gained its rightful visibility.^[3] The book is a valuable and insightful contribution not only to Chinese or Asian studies under the old national signifier or area grid but also to a new understanding of cultural studies in an era of globalization.

[Notes](#)

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Notes

[1.](#) For related discussion, see David Leiwei Li's critical edition, *Globalization and the Humanities* (Hong Kong University Press, 2003).

[2.](#) See Fredric Jameson, "Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue" in Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi eds. *The Cultures of Globalization* (Duke University Press, 1998): 60.

[3.](#) The only element escaping Lu's otherwise encyclopedic coverage of Chinese postmodernity is the development of the Internet, which is a topic taken up by Liu Kang in the edition of *Globalization and the Humanities* (see note 1 for bibliographical details).

Meditation on a freeway suicide: the sacrifice of autobiography

by James Tobias

Editors' note: This essay is a long monograph that develops an important new theoretical approach to the understanding of AIDS in the United States. We are pleased to be able to present a work of such substance and original thought about one of our most existentially and socially pressing problems. We present the essay in two formats, a briefer, abstracted version and the full length version. Each section of the briefer version is also linked to that part of the longer version which considers the ideas from a given section in greater detail. Thus the brief version of the article is both an abstract of the longer version and can be profitably read just as is. The essay in its full length is available for printing out in text form. We encourage readers to make such a print out so as to have time to consider Tobias' complex argument as a whole.

If you wish you can go to the [complete version of the text](#) now. If you print complete text version out, you will get first the abstracted version, then the full text version.

Meditation on a freeway suicide: the sacrifice of autobiography

by James Tobias

1. Introduction to an event: framing a life ended

On April 30, 1998, at approximately 3:00 PM, Daniel Victor Jones, an HIV positive man, drove his pickup truck to the top of a south Los Angeles freeway interchange. After making threatening gestures at other drivers, he stopped the truck and effectively shut down two Los Angeles freeways during the afternoon rush hour. On the

roadbed, he displayed a large banner, weighting it with a heavy container against the power of the wind. Clearly visible from the air, it proclaimed to the news helicopters capturing the scene from above, “HMO’s are in it for the money. Live free, love safe, or die.” Jones made a 911 call which was routed to the Highway Patrol. He explained that he was in pain and claimed mistreatment by the HMO in whose care he had been placed. (Doctors confirmed after the event that Jones in fact had developed cancer.)

At one point, Jones set his truck, and himself, on fire. His dog, a golden retriever, perished in the burning truck. Hurrying out of the pick-up, he extinguished his own burning clothing, then, stepped up on the freeway wall, perhaps with the intent of being seen by motorists caught in the traffic below or of jumping off. However, he only threw off a bag containing a videotaped statement. According to news reports, the videotaped statement gave details of his symptoms, explained his anger at the HMO which had refused him treatment, announced his decision not to fight the disease any longer, and stated that he was “a dead man.” He ended the tape with a sardonic, “See ya.”

Moments after throwing the bag off the overpass, after close to 50 minutes of a stand-off during which Los Angeles Police Department sharpshooters stood at ready with Jones in their sights, Jones aimed a shotgun into his mouth, leaned over it, and shot himself instead. Jones’ graphic display of self-inflicted violence was broadly televised. Jones’ self-inflicted carnage left a torrent of blood streaming away across the concrete. His banner had become partially obscured, folded by a gust of wind. Jones died at approximately 3:50 PM. All four directions of freeway traffic impacted by the event were released by 7 PM that evening.

Visibly and visually, Jones directed the framing of his life in terms of the threats he experienced to his body, the medical organizations that abused their responsibility to secure it, and, finally, its effacement. In this essay, I will argue that Jones’ freeway suicide constitutes an act of authoring—the authoring not simply of a life story or of a news event, but more importantly, of an event that happened *to* television. In this authoring, Jones locates and identifies the system of televisuality, as he brings it to reveal its own operations. His claims speak beyond the frame and its emergency broadcast system to name a broader order of mediation and corporeality—of justice and punishment, of health and illness, of sanctity and sanction, of life and death— in service of which the “live” networked medium operates. The authoring of this televisuality through a system of reportage equipped to gauge the relative market value of emergency situations reads finally as an act of autobiography— albeit under conditions and in terms with which we may not be familiar or comfortable.

[\[go to expanded discussion of section 1\]](#)

2. Media coverage, confusion, and contradictions

The fact that afternoon television viewing is aimed at significant numbers of children and homemakers who constitute the daytime viewing public deserves consideration in an accounting of Jones' actions along with, for example, the timing of his suicide during rush hour traffic. Numerous scholars (among them, Williams 1974, Morley 1986, Spigel 1992a, 1992b, or Haralovich 1992) have observed a specificity of television viewing by analyzing television programming as it intersects with social dynamics and cultural practices. Viewer habits have been understood in relation to, for example, youth- or family-oriented programming as media companies have sought demographic targets such as the suburban housewife or the teenage. Here, strategies of appeal may build on social identity (Morley or Spigel). More generally, Williams noted the larger problematic of television in relation to "mobile privatization." "Televisual flow" enables a conflicted knitting together of private experience necessitated by the loss of public, social built space incurred in the process of suburbanization (Williams). The timing and placement of Jones' television suicide and the conflicting responses it prompted becomes clear within these large-scale critical perspectives. Jones' death interrupted the flow of traffic through a key freeway intersection of greater Los Angeles at the time of day commuters begin their return home, and so delineate the difference between afternoon and evening viewing.

[\[go to expanded discussion of section 2\]](#)

3. Reality television: an economy of pre-emption

Historically, Jones' suicide broadcast comes at the juncture of two periods in television reporting. An earlier period deployed advanced visual technologies (for example, extending real-time remote coverage to freeway pursuit, or offering immersive camera set-ups for sporting events, giving producers or consumers a choice of framing angle) and established new conditions for the reporting of reality, apparently bringing "the real" ever closer to the grasp of mediation. Our own later period, on the other hand, claims the video footage of the stricken and falling World Trade Towers, available because of now ubiquitous video capture of the everyday, as a temporal icon for a bruised national psyche. And the national psyche's anxiety of the real exceeds what can be securely mediated through the "embedding" of journalists in warfare or the staging of a "heroic landing" by a president on an air craft carrier. The difference here is in televisual orientation towards capturing what is real: An earlier emphasis on renewed possibilities for technological capture gives way to a more recent emphasis on somehow

recouping, re-framing, or restoring the symbolic import all the more important because of the amount of material available. This process today extends beyond what Williams understood as mobile privatization.

Media producers, in pronouncing events worthy of receivers' attention, make a performative claim to capture or articulate reality that is novel to, exclusive of, opposed to, ignorant of, or otherwise incommensurate to the experience of life held by the interpreter. This is in spite of the fact that it is precisely this interpreter to whom the event is supposed to matter. The operative distinction — producer/receiver, narrator/interpreter — historically has been seen to be structural and dynamic. But television's rhetoric of mediatic eventuality revolves around one element above all others. That distinction between narrator and interpreter, between representation and social experience, is framed most powerfully as televisual violence. For these reasons, an understanding of Jones' freeway suicide matters not only in relation to the historicity of the media event, but also in relation to mediations of identity and social being—technology-intensive processes of living speech.

[\[go to expanded discussion of section 3\]](#)

4. Performativity and medial agency

Jones engaged the performativities of violence, of information, of mediation generally, to author from outside the system of “live media” even as he was captured within its televisual frame. If the coverage of Jones' violent death was, indeed, shaped within a larger framing of discursive violence, that discursive violence itself became part of the meanings of the event, as I demonstrate below in a discussion of the varied responses to Jones' death in the form of Internet postings and letters to the editor.

In this case, a body takes a direct action amid networks of historical and discursive violence—and our mediated communications or knowledge thereof. So this event, tied to a reviled body as its origin, is hard to “localize” in a collective investing of identity. Here, as the body performs the very abandonment to which been subject socially, a correspondence of act and reception beyond Hall's encoding or decoding frameworks takes hold. This event goes beyond merely discursive struggle in an economy of pre-emption. This correspondence of act and reception suggests that even broadcasters attempting to retake control of a message stolen away from them (in Hall's terms, dominant readings decoding an oppositionally encoded event) are in important ways already implicated in the exceptional event itself. The dominant framework of production and reception here is reversed as reception becomes an act of authorship. In this reversal, television's power to assert the historical is undermined as a life is, literally, historically inscribed.

[\[go to expanded discussion of section 4\]](#)

5. The sacrifice of autobiography

To read Jones' death as an act of autobiography might impose a distorting lens in two ways. Kaplan (1992) cautions as to the viability of autobiography understood as a Western genre dedicated to recounting psychosocial growth stages over time in an individual life (118,127). More to the point, Kaplan argues for narratives articulating life in resistance to the laws of the privileged Western subject and the laws of autobiographical genre alike. For Kaplan, testimonial literature, women's prison narratives, and other documents marginal to the practice of autobiography as literature constitute crucial "out-law" genres. In the context of a transnational feminist criticism, these genres are seen to challenge the generic conventions and forms of autobiography. Kaplan is careful to say that these "out-law" genres must be read as more than merely autobiographical.

"Instead of a discourse of individual authorship, we find a discourse of situation; a 'politics of location'" (119).

In this way, we might read Jones' death as an out-law autobiography which instead of engaging the melancholy of the subject instead forces a political challenge. Daniel Jones' last words were delivered in a spectacular suicide made for the local news, designed to present his death to the people of Southern California and beyond.

But might this "out-law" death end in mere mediatic transgression, or worse, capitulation—the satisfying of a phobic desire to maintain order by exterminating the Other? Precisely *how* would Jones' display on that freeway interchange constitute autobiography? Is this a performative text or an act of terror? Can an author be produced in an act of self-destruction? If so, is such authorship partially accomplished in the media coverage of that act? Are the protests, debates, or empathies expressed in the aftermath of such an act part of the "text"? What did Jones have to say about HMOs, sex, love, and freedom? And who exactly was Daniel Jones?

[\[go to expanded discussion of section 5\]](#)

6. Responsibility, abandonment, dehumanization: Daniel Jones' life after death

In this case there is ultimately no clear-cut distinction between a public and private identity for the individual subject. Instead, we see that the bodies of the medical subject, the legal subject, and the mediated subject co-occur and overlap, and in ways that may be

threatening to receivers. Given that medical, legal, and media regimes routinely work to assert their own mutual boundaries, we rarely glimpse the overlap. Jones managed to author a situation in which this overlap became visible. Rather than say that Jones's body moves from the private to the public, it's more appropriate to say that Jones' death placed these three regimes of the corporeal subject on display all at once. The medical and the juridical visibly coincide as media event.

To accept Janet Jones' conclusion that Daniel was suicided by an HMO is perhaps, then, to suggest that Daniel's freeway suicide enacts perhaps the spirit, if not the letter, of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. But at the same time, it is crucial to place the larger measure of responsibility, agency, or intent with Jones himself. Jones acted as an author, not of a text, but of an event. In this authoring, he availed himself of the enunciative aspects proper to a specific network and mode of mediation. Jones exercised a form of *medial agency*. He was not simply a man suicided by the social—and there are ways in which the social was injured by his suicide. The discursive riot noted above is an indication of that injury.

[\[go to expanded discussion of section 6\]](#)

7. Liveness as a game of violence

Where television treated the incident as a game of violence, minimized the political implications of Jones' critique of for-profit health care, and branded Jones an irresponsible subject so as to motivate further televisual control over live broadcasting, that is not to say that these official responses were the *only* response to Jones' death. One important point missing from television's account of the incident was precisely how much of the incident had been planned by Jones.

Jones death occurred as a contradictory instance of authorial agency working between the levels of the built *and* the mediatic city, the local and the national, the public and the private, to transform potent silences into plural responses. It's necessary to see this medial agency at work in Jones' actions, not only in order to understand his power grab of the regions' thoroughly troubled real and imaginary systems of place, but in order to understand the reactions it provoked as well. Against the performativities of abandonment motivating Jones' death and accumulating in its wake, empathy responds across differentials of identity, to the point of demanding the elimination of HMOs.

[\[go to expanded discussion of section 7\]](#)

8. Transformations of affect: queer artists and AIDS activism

Still, Jones' specific demand for "safe love" speaks to his experience of living with HIV or AIDS. If one of his objects was criticism of the national health industries, lack of treatment for HIV-related illness was a primary motivator for his protest. But even HIV/AIDS activists were taken aback by Jones' performance. Shared identity within the various sectors of AIDS demographics did not guarantee comprehension of Jones' death. AIDS activist and critics tended to see the voluntary death of an HIV+ man as a tragic suicide, an unnecessary death by a person unable to overcome his social marginalization.

There is no futurity in the tragic gay suicide; self-deliverance implies some such futurity. To the degree that some meaning is found in voluntary death, the self that undertakes that death can be delivered from the abandonments by which its body had been violated, and the social may perhaps become subject to transformation. The social ceases to be an eschatology for the marginal subject. Yet this futurity is also an impossible one. It is not a future that can be seen exemplified in a body, now gone, that would warrant the intents of the person, now silent. This futurity can not be securely grasped or taken as evidence, a model. If abandonment is ended by voluntary death, history as impossibility, as disappearance or as exclusion, opens to its reverse: futurity without a secured history. This futurity can not be linked to a body constrained or supported, violated or cared for, within the social.

In just this way, Jones' release from the social which he condemned engages a larger problematic of, simultaneously, an impossible futurity and an impossible historicity—like every other HIV/AIDS death in the so-called "post-AIDS" era, he dramatizes the transformation of the impossible itself, as a long-hoped for future care in a history-destroying pandemic arrives but comes up short.

[\[go to expanded discussion of section 8\]](#)

9. Articulating the impossible: discourses of self-deliverance

While it has been difficult for HIV/AIDS activists and critics to differentiate the suiciding subject from the subject of self-deliverance, Jones' actions were not entirely singular or unimagined. Before retroviral therapies were available, artists and poets had already explored the limits of the interruption of history and futurity which Jones brought home.

In "Vital Signs," for example, poet Essex Hemphill (1994) had already provided exactly the kind of consideration of affect and responsibility that Watney would call for (see above). If Watney condemned "irresponsible" individual gay men abandoned to their loss, Hemphill explores responsibility in terms of erotic mutuality. Here, rather than a demand on the irresponsible other, a desire for

mutual protection is satisfied within the passionate communicativity of the body. The meanings of death here waver from healing transformation, self-deliverance, to murder, against which the polyphonous narrator builds his textual speech. The claim of the self extends from life to death and is recovered in affect that poses the search for the self in terms of a love for another.

The deliverance of this love, in the hindsight of an impossible future that precedes the impossible past, is a reality whose manifestation does not fail, even though this truth comes as a “thorny dream.” The “I” posits in its transformations a corporeal poesis before, through, after death, as pronominal struggles for presence gain over meaninglessness. Facing nothingness, it recovers all, including its own impending loss. While there is never any final dramatic exit, the “I” writes to move past the overlaid perimeters of carefully delimited textual architectures to see the “vital signs” of love. The self is thus distanced from the self in a textual performance. Death becomes an opening, not an ending.

What Jones’ death shares with Hemphill’s poem is a characterization of a physical communication of the receptive male body as a site where violence occurs. This characterization diverges from many feminist theoretical accounts which locate the site of violence as the feminine, precisely as it finally diverges from performance art by undeniably exploding the terms of active and passive through which the male body is supposed to direct its actions. For the finality of his physical death requires an account of enactment— not merely the effects of performance. In interrupting media time, in his anticipatory and posthumous positioning of the media between failing medicine and overzealous law, Daniel Jones demonstrated a particular kind of medial agency, not individual or personal agency. Daniel Jones, a self delivered: from death by AIDS, from death by abandonment. But delivered from what else? Repentance.

[\[go to expanded discussion of section 9\]](#)

10. Los Angeles in the world

Agamben ([1993], 2000) argues that instead of either the prison, the clinic, or the madhouse (those institutions through which Foucault tracked the particular epistemic ruptures of modernity), the abandonment of the subject takes another location: the camp. The camp refers not simply to the physical forms of concentration or refugee camps, but any “de-localized location” in which those who do not fully qualify as “people” or rather, those who have already become merely “bare life,” are to be kept. The camp is not a physical or natural place. It is a liminal space, coordinated in the name of the sovereign state for the abandonment of the subject whose body will be nakedly exposed to power there. By claiming in the video tape which he threw over the freeway overpass to police

that he was already “a dead man,” Daniel Jones suggested the scene of his freeway suicide as yet another camp, another “de-localized location.” The former Eagle Scout and military medical technician placed his televisual location in the no-man’s land between home and city, between HMO and prison, but also between the marginalized “bare life” that he refused to become and the mediation through which he would communicate the senselessness threatened in his abandonment.

In order to properly recognize the sense of Jones’ actions, we concentrate not, finally, solely on the state of exception through which he lived, but that through which he enacted his death: mediation. In mediating the story of his life as an end to the state of abandonment in which he lived, Jones’ story can be seen, problematically, as autobiography. But the difficulties in taking this life story as autobiography can perhaps be solved by posing the biopolitical, or in Agamben’s alternative term, “thanatopolitical” context explicitly here. Jones’ life story, even as it continues to stream on the Internet, is not simply autobiography, but “auto-thanatography” as well.

Above the city and its viewers, an HIV + worker, displaying a banner condemning his abandonment by the health institutions charged with his well-being, self-destructs as cameras hover, traffic stopped below. Police sharpshooters lower their rifles unused as his body falls, while the image of the bare life he exposed refracts back into the public eye. Ending his life with the weapon of choice of American men, Jones terrorizes popular representations of the AIDS victim. He makes his body unable to perceive this scene and himself impossible to recognize.

In the creation of this irreparable misrecognition, he upsets the specular rhetoric of visibility and perspective that gives HIV and AIDS their coherence in our popular, legal, and medical imaginations. At the same time, he brings the bare life abandoned in biopolitics, in thanatopolitics, into view. He marks a point of exchange between the orders of speaking and perceiving, of phantasmatic and historical reality, of public and private, of the camp and a state without sovereignty. The message he extends from this point addresses the health care system writ large, to finally say: Born for love and learned of pleasure, this body faced abandonment from ones meant to help. So might yours.

“Live free, love safe, or die.” These words, on the other hand, describes the conditions of the biopolitical imperative from which Daniel Jones delivered himself. That terrible injunction served once as the script for his spontaneous performance, but serves now, to name the system which he made to appear. With the lives of health institutions more important than the lives of the humans which animate them, their maintenance more important than our nurturing or our deliverance, their goals more loudly pronounced

than our needs—the name of *this* system is terror.

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10. Los Angeles in the world

Will we recognize Daniel Jones when next we see him? The problems of intelligibility, of trauma, of history, of futurity, is considerable. Inspectors of Daniel Jones' autobiography demanded an identification: sniper, deranged, HIV+. But he fired the gun at his head, destroying his face, leaving his body exposed, inert, and in the open. The human head: creator of form, receiver of phenomenal experience. The face: figure of both public recognition and personal identity. Suggestively, Agamben ([1995] 2000) writes,

“The face is the only location of community, the only possible city.”

The difficulty in recognition here has to do with the logic of abandonment through which we live. We are unable ultimately, given our need to hold on to loss and make it meaningful, finally to differentiate suicide from deliverance, mourning from anguished hope, self-dismissal from defiant anger.

The varying responses to Jones' death make the contrary communicativity of medial agency clear. Those responses suggest that we would like to make Daniel Jones responsible for this contrary communicativity as a failure of resolution. We would like to take hope in “his” death (our continuing deaths), or to continue to make “him” pay for it (our continuing deaths), or a variant of making him pay, to abandon his act (and our continuing deaths). Instead we should make him responsible for the eventuality of this communicativity's becoming visible. If Jones received himself in a literally ecstatic exit that cannot know the form of life *of* which his image remains but *from* which he has departed, our responses, on the other hand, are uniformly abject because his loss is not for him but for us. The appearance of our abjection, our abandonment, is the symptom of his disturbing disappearance, a disappearance enacted and embodied to say: Bodies meant to be seen and to speak are being destroyed.

This relationship between disturbance and abandonment articulated by a medial agent requires further determination of its communicativity, its place as entity and event. In Jones' radical critique of HMOs for their harmful effects on public health has to do with the phantasmatic quality of HIV, as Roman observed, to upstage the body. What does this mean within mediatic

communication systems?

Sturken (1997) has argued that our narratives about HIV center around the technological representability of the virus in medical contexts, and she points to the resulting catastrophic equation of the virus with the body that harbors it and through whose tissues it is glimpsed. To see the virus

“will reveal its truths, imaging the immune system will reveal how it functions” (231).

Within the regime of medical imaging, the camera, capable of both aerial views and microscopic views, has been historically granted the power to “capture” reality. Inner and outer space become accessible in spite of the fact that the human eye cannot see either of them. The representation of the HIV virus, then, is structured in a conflation between imagery of inner and outer space, of life within the body and the world beyond it. The body itself is featured as the terrain of a battle which marshals space age technologies to hunt out the hiding places of the virus (231).

“The microscopic images of the immune system depict a universal, unmarked body, one stripped of gender, race, sexuality, or age—precisely the kinds of differences that have marked bodies in the AIDS pandemic. They let us inside the body as if we have not wrenched past its borders. These images operate with an anchoring context, profoundly distanced from touch, smell, sight, and other everyday bodily functions.”

“Into this ‘sacrosanct’ and distanced landscape comes HIV, which popular graphics and microphotographs depict as visual chaos. [...] In these images the virus looks huge and lethal, as if it would explode if dropped on one of its prongs, which tend to resemble detonators. The coils in the center of the image have prompted some critics to describe it as a ‘grenade’ that would explode if the coil were pulled.” (238)

As medicine goes to war against chaos, the body thus stripped of its identifying features can become confused with the virus, with blame displaced from the virus to the body which the virus attacks (247). This displacement is all the more inevitable given that the diagnostic transparency achieved in medical imaging of HIV is unfortunately not reflected in the therapeutic reach of combination therapies. While reducing the existence of the virus in the patient’s circulatory system, combination therapies currently are unable to eradicate the virus in its “hiding places” in the lymphatic system in which it continues to reproduce.

So, even if the territory to be won might have been his own body, Daniel’s refusal to take up arms is significant. To fight on that

terrain is to risk locating himself as enemy ground, both topology *and* figure of blame. Instead, the ex-Air Force emergency medical technician sets up camp for a last stand on a freeway overpass, invoking a topological view of a vast urbanity only seen in its full expanse from the air, from networks of cameras—a virtual geography of reportage that, as the responses from viewers which I surveyed reveal, is nonetheless well-traveled and much feared. The choice of this locale places a defense of the self against the popular fears of the dangerous outsiders that are believed to be running amok in the city, and so presumably justify the escalating surveillance and militarization of the megalopolis.

Davis' *Ecology of Fear* (1998) maps what Davis calls the “scanscape” of Los Angeles, in which new technologies monitor the city's high-value structures and shut down institutional access to those who are, effectively, non-persons in that environment (366). Davis situates the circulation of high cost high tech surveillance systems into the home market within an urban environment that increasingly fights its battles virtually and remotely. Davis argues that the disavowal and ignorance of the natural environment evinced in the sprawl of Los Angeles coincides with the disavowal of the needs of those who work there. He tracks the representational catastrophes visited upon Los Angeles in fiction and cinema to show that routinely, invading hordes and natural disasters stand in for the violence of exclusion, containment, and neglect by which the environment is destroyed and workers (like Jones) exploited.

He adds the category of fear to a classical sociological model of urban decay which shows L.A.'s simultaneously rich and decayed urban center radiating through zones occupied by workers, and continuing into richer belt cities surrounded by a prison archipelago at the very fringe of the region. Adding in “fear” to the sociological analysis of class and zoning allows Davis to map child molestation free zones, drug free zones, neighborhood watch zones, gang free parks, and prostitution abatement zones to an urban planning scheme that is as much concerned with “riot tectonics” as the protection of corporate headquarters and the privacy of gated cities. Similarly, in the pulp fictions that depict the city, Davis maintains that non-whites, workers, and sexual minorities bear the fictional brunt of the developmental forces that have polluted and overdeveloped the region even as they have sacrificed it to the very dynamics unleashed in that process (364-365).

In *The Turner Diaries*, Davis, notes, the notorious pulp fiction which inspired Timothy McVeigh, right wing warriors “cripple LAX, blow up freeway overpasses, set the harbor ablaze, and cut the aqueduct” after slaughtering Jews and Blacks (333). *Independence Day*, Davis argues, ranks America's top cities in terms of destructive appeal. Aliens first tragically destroy New York, then parodically destroy Los Angeles, which appears as “a caricatured mob of hippies, new agers, and gay men” dancing ecstatically atop a

skyscraper as they await vicious aliens (277). Televisuality, what Davis calls a “scanscape,” functions as a relay in Los Angeles’ virtual topography to help provide a popular view of this city as urban chaos. This virtual topography, a phantasmatic one projected in the relative absence of public space, is the locale of Daniel Jones’ autobiography. Jones’ “last stand,” then, staked out a space from which to expose the chaos of HIV within his body to the chaos of the megalopolis outside it. He left his body exposed in a mediatic state of exception to a state of medical emergency—AIDS as corporeal chaos—counterposed against a juridical one—the Los Angeles region as political chaos.

Foucault’s ([1978] 1994) observations on the concept of the disturbed individual, rather than the work on sexuality that informs just about all of the treatments of AIDS and identity discussed above, provide some insights here. It is in neither the medicalization of the homosexual nor the disciplining of the prisoner that the significance of Foucault’s late theory of biopolitics emerges. Rather it is in the regimes that emerge between them:

“[...] Since the great crimes without reason of the early nineteenth century, the debate did not in fact revolve so much around freedom, even though the question was always there. The real problem, the one in effect throughout, was the problem of the dangerous individual. Are there individuals who are intrinsically dangerous? By what signs can they be recognized, and how can one react to their presence? [Contemporary] penal law did not evolve from an ethic of freedom to a science of psychic determinism; rather, it enlarged, organized, and codified the suspicion and the location of dangerous individuals, from the rare and monstrous figure of the monomaniac to the common everyday figure of the degenerate, of the pervert, of the constitutionally unbalanced, of the immature, and so on.”

“It must also be noted that this transformation took place not only from medicine toward law, as through the pressure of rational knowledge on older prescriptive systems; it also operated through a perpetual mechanism of summoning and of interacting between medical or psychological knowledge and the judicial institution” (198- 199).

Foucault’s critique of institutions is accompanied an account of “technologies of subjectivization” through which individual bodies, in relating to the self in terms of social identity, also bind the self and its consciousness to external sovereign power. Foucault’s suggestion that what is distinct about modern state power is its inclusion of the biological life force of the individual within its

operations of power. Foucault's point, of course, is that individualization and political sovereignty operate in a double bind. Techniques of power operate along with those technologies of the self that allow the subject movement, transformation, speech—broadly, for my purposes here, the poesis of the corporeal.

But as many critics have observed, the nature of the way Foucault formulates this double bind that poses difficulties for theorizing cultural memory, collectivity, or community—or autobiography. Kaplan's "out-law" narratives and Smith and Watson's interest in "collaborative mediation" are only two theorizations of autobiography that respond to the challenge Foucault posed.

In his critique of Foucault's formulation of biopolitics, Agamben ([1995] 1998) offers a revision that is useful to this discussion of the mediated, voluntary death of a "disturbed individual" positioned between medicine and law. Agamben points out that Foucault's analysis of sovereign power concentrates largely on juridical models even while attempting to overthrow them. This concentration makes it difficult to see, even if we grasp conceptually the double bind within which Foucault argues that individuals are caught, that is difficult to identify its (figural or physical) location.

"Where, in the body of power, is the zone of indistinction (or at least, the zone of intersection) at which techniques of individualization and totalizing procedures converge? [...] Confronted with the power of the society of the spectacle which is everywhere transforming the political realm today, is it legitimate or even possible to hold subjective technologies and political techniques apart?"
(6)

Agamben pursues just this question of the figural location of power, locating it not in the body of the individual but rather in the location of individuals in states of exception: the "camp." In the camp, a permanent state of exception is established. Life is stripped bare under an absolute sovereignty. Humanity is asserted as a biological condition at most (10). Agamben is thinking here of the concentration camps of Fascist Germany but is prompted in his thought by the ethnic cleansing that occurred in the former Yugoslavia during its dissolution into smaller states. But the camp is not, as the prison or asylum were for Foucault, simply a place of confinement (20).

In opposition to Foucault's thesis that biopower is a relatively recent mutation achieved in institutional confinements, Agamben places its origins in the founding of the sovereign power of the state to which individuals are bound. Agamben argues that the sovereign power of the Western state was originally established by means of the anterior exemption of the sovereign from the laws which the sovereign will enact (15). (Agamben is careful to note that this exemption continues today. He cites the example of the American

constitution which allows impeachment to remove the president from office but which results in no legal punishment in and of itself [103].) In the mirror image of the sovereign who is beyond the law, archaic law allowed the killing of persons who for whatever reason had been sacrificially consigned to the underworld. This person, abandoned to the social order, was no longer of the living, and therefore could be killed (71). The agency of the sovereign, then, is mirrored by the abjection of the subject precisely in terms of their sacred status in relation to the law.

Homo sacer denotes this non-person, as Agamben puts it, this “bare life.” It is a life which becomes exposed to power even as it is “banned” by the state.

“He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather abandoned by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable” (28).

If sovereign law is established in a “ban,” the law’s operation operates not in terms of *logos* but rather in terms of abandonment. *Homo sacer* is the one who can be killed by those who are subject to the sovereign state, and who themselves are potentially subject to the ban of exclusion which in its most extreme form is the punishment of death (84).

Such citizenship, of course, comes with the privilege of the free man:

“It is as if male citizens had to pay for their participation in political life with an unconditional subjection to a power of death [...]”

Further:

“The sovereign tie is more originary than the tie of the positive rule or of the social pact, but the sovereign tie is in truth only an untying. And what this untying implies and produces—bare life, which dwells in the no-man’s-land between the home and the city—is, from the point of view of sovereignty, the originary political element” (90).

Agamben clarifies elsewhere that what he means by bare life may apply today to a range of “social-juridical identities,” all of which re-code the problematic of bare life in contemporaneity:

“the voter, the worker, the journalist, the student, but also the HIV-positive, the transvestite, the porno star, the elderly, the parent, the woman” (Agamben [1993] 2000, 7).

The banned figure should be more generally familiar: Agamben suggests the wolf-man, that is, the man who is indistinguishable from the animal (107). Or he refers to the bandit (183).

“...what is banned is delivered over to its own separateness and, at the same time, consigned to the mercy of the one who abandons it.”

It is not difficult to see either Foucault's prisoner or lunatic in these terms, nor is it difficult to see Jones in these terms—the man taken at first for a sniper, who brought the police and the media out in force, who, according to one Internet respondent, might well have killed himself, but did he have to kill his dog too?

Agamben argues further that instead of either the prison, the clinic, or the madhouse (those institutions through which Foucault tracked the particular epistemic ruptures of modernity), the state of exception which calls our attention to the abandonment of the subject takes another form: the camp. The camp is a “zone of indistinction” where sovereignty abandons bare life, but it belongs centrally to modernity, not the classical origins of biopolitical being.

The camp, then, refers not simply to the physical forms of concentration or refugee camps, but any “de-localized location” in which those who do not fully qualify as “people” or rather, those who have already become merely “bare life,” are to be kept. The camp is not a physical or natural place. It is a liminal space, coordinated in the name of the sovereign state for the abandonment of the subject whose body will be nakedly exposed to power there. The camp of biopolitical modernity, as much as the refugee camp, is just as much to be found in the hospital room where a patient who continues to breathe and whose heart continues to beat, yet whose brain is already dead.

What distinguishes contemporary from classical biopolitics is that the figures tending to this contemporary zone of abandonment are representatives of modern regimes of knowledge, not direct representatives of the state:

“...the physician and the scientist now move in the zone of indistinction once occupied by the sovereign alone” (159).

Between law and medicine, modernity has produced a new *homo sacer*:

“When natural life is wholly included in the *polis*—and this much, by now, has already happened, these thresholds [separating life from what is outside it, political life from non-political life] pass [...] beyond the dark boundaries separating life from death in order to

identify a new living dead man, a new sacred man” (131).

By claiming in the video tape which he threw over the freeway overpass to police that he was already “a dead man,” Daniel Jones suggested the scene of his freeway suicide as yet another camp, another “de-localized location”. The former Eagle Scout and military medical technician placed his televisual location in the no-man’s land between home and city, between HMO and prison, but also between the marginalized “bare life” that he refused to become and the mediation through which he would communicate the senselessness threatened in his abandonment.

For Agamben, neither the declaration of rights, on the one hand, nor the extension of biologico-scientific principles into the political order can be recognized unless they are understood in the “biopolitical (or thanatopolitical) context” in which modernity has re-established them (123). In this regard, it is important to recall the traumatic masculinity that I have established at work here, above. It is important not to assert Jones either as the “idiot who removed himself from the gene pool” or as a messiah figure who brings hope. As Agamben notes, in the state of exception,

“...it is impossible to distinguish transgression of the law from execution of the law” (57).

In order to properly recognize the sense of Jones’ actions, we concentrate not, finally, solely on the state of exception through which he lived, but that through which he enacted his death: mediation.

In mediating the story of his abandonment as an end to the state of exception, Jones’ life story can be seen, problematically, as autobiography. But the difficulties in taking this life story as autobiography can perhaps be clarified by making the biopolitical, or in Agamben’s alternative term, “thanatopolitical” context explicit here. Jones’ life story, even as it continues to stream on the Internet, can be established not simply as autobiography, but as “auto-thanatography” as well.

Above the city and its viewers, an HIV + worker, displaying a banner condemning his abandonment by the health institutions charged with his well-being, self-destructs as cameras hover, traffic stopped below. Police sharpshooters lower their rifles unused as his body falls, while the image of the bare life he exposed refracts back into the public eye. Ending his life with the weapon of choice of American men, Jones terrorizes popular representations of the AIDS victim. He makes his body unable to perceive this scene and himself impossible to recognize.

In the creation of this irreparable misrecognition, he upsets the specular rhetoric of visibility and perspective that gives HIV and AIDS their coherence in our popular, legal, and medical

imaginings. At the same time, he brings the bare life abandoned in biopolitics, in thanatopolitics, into view. This short-circuit negates the identity of the receptive male as “sodomite,” as named in the homophobic circulation of the murderous abuse of identity often misnamed masculinity. The carnage that results is the remnant of a particular person, not a universal symbol for bodies suffering AIDS. He marks a point of exchange between the orders of speaking and perceiving, of phantasmatic and historical reality, of public and private, of the camp and a state without sovereignty. The message he extends from this point addresses the health care system writ large, to finally say: Born for love and learned of pleasure, this body faced abandonment from ones meant to help. So might yours.

Where the media’s scheduled liveness promises continuity and connection, Daniel’s live broadcast operated through the pause—cessation. In forty minutes and a split second the circulation, not the confinement, of the bare life of the human comes into view, and Daniel is delivered. As bare life releasing himself from a state of exception, suicide and self-deliverance are conflated in a traumatic and traumatizing corporeal poesis. With this sight, we were called to imagine any number of ways to love and live which would not demand that the cost of autobiography be the life that performs it. Autobiography enacted, then, incurs a sacrifice, occurs as autothanatography in the sovereign politics of the abandoned. And to recognize this sacrifice, we must learn to read beyond the imperatives of identity, beyond the constitution of selfhood, and into the ways we destroy these.

Daniel’s freeway suicide renders our world understandable in his death. This transmutation of flesh and the world is what George Bataille referred to in the epigraph above:

“The death that delivers me from the world that kills me
has enclosed this real world in the unreality of the *me*
that dies.”

No media stunt, no aspirations of celebrity, and nothing, after all, left to chance. In an autobiography of voluntary death and an autothanatography that continues to write his name on the electronic screen, Daniel becomes a constellation aligned over the virtual and physical world of Los Angeles. In inscribing himself into the constellation of our understanding, he changes a mediated ecology of fear into a terrible performance of life. Our world is inscribed in his body.

“Live free, love safe, or die.” These words, on the other hand, describes the biopolitical imperative from which Daniel Jones delivered himself. That terrible injunction served once as the script for his spontaneous performance, but serves now, to name the system which he made to appear. With the lives of institutions more important than the lives of the humans which animate them, their maintenance more important than our nurturing or our deliverance,

their goals more loudly pronounced than our needs—the name of *this* system is terror.

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Notes

[1.](#) The measures taken were concrete and specific, on both the levels of production and distribution. As I mention farther along in my discussion, MSNBC increased the lag between camera capture and television broadcast to ensure greater editorial control over live events. Even more revealing for the scholar, of five local Los Angeles stations I contacted in hopes of obtaining a recording of the broadcast, only one, the local Paramount affiliate, was willing to offer a videotape copy, at a cost of \$450.00. All other local affiliates refused to provide research copies of the broadcast, all mentioning that the event had brought them a degree of criticism that they could not afford the further discussion on the issue of Jones' suicide to which, ostensibly, scholarly research and discussion might lead.

[2.](#) *The Orange County Register*, May 1, 1998, "Freeway Suicide Televised" A1.

[3.](#) *City News Service*, "Suicide," May 1, 1998.

[4.](#) *City News Service*, "Sniper," April 30, 1998.

[5.](#) *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 1998.

[6.](#) "Gazette: Death by Bureaucracy. PWA Said HMO Made Him Do It," *POZ Magazine* 9/98

[7.](#) *Orange County Register*, "Freeway Suicide Televised," May 1 1998, A1.

[8.](#) *City News Service*, "Sniper," 4/30/98.

[9.](#) *USA Today*, May 4, 1998 3D.

[10.](#) KCBS Channel 2000, "Talk Back: Does TV News Coverage Go Too Far?" 5/1 -7/98, accessed 6/16/99.

[11.](#) See, for example, various treatments in Crimp (1988), Crimp and Rolston (1990), Crimp (2002), *Bad Objects Choices* (1991), Halperin (1995), Gever, Grayson, and Paramar (1993), and others. For a pre-AIDS discussion of a similar dynamic linking homophobia and syphilis, see Hockquenghem ([1972] 1996), etc.

[12.](#) In California, the legal standard for felony prosecution for

passing on the HIV virus through sexual contact is *somewhat* stricter than elsewhere. But it still turns around requirements of discourse, not individual privacy, since affirmative defense is allowed for consenting adults. According to the ACLU, felony prosecution requires knowledge of one's own infection, non-disclosure of one's HIV status to one's partner, unprotected sex, and intent to infect. American Civil Liberties Union Freedom Network, "State Criminal Statutes on HIV Transmission," http://archive.aclu.org/issues/aids/HIV_criminalization.html, 6/2000, accessed 8/31/03.

[13.](#) *Chicago Tribune*, "Freeway Suicide Captured on Television," May 1, 1998, 8.

[14.](#) See note 7.

[15.](#) NPR, *All Things Considered*, "L.A. Freeway Suicide Roundtable," May 1 1998.

[16.](#) ABC, *Good Morning America*, "Suicide on the Freeway," May 3, 1998.

[17.](#) ABC News, *Good Morning America* May 3 1998, provisional transcript.

[18.](#) Howard Rosenberg, "The Russian Roulette of Live News Coverage," *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 1998, F1.

[19.](#) Howard Rosenberg, "Reviving Argument for Televised Executions," *Los Angeles Times*, December 2, 1998 F1.

[20.](#) Rosenberg May 2 1998.

[21.](#) KCBS Channel 2000, "Talk Back: Does TV News Coverage Go Too Far?" 5/1 –7/98, accessed 6/16/99.

[22.](#) *Los Angeles Times*, "Letters Desk," May 9 1998 B7.

[23.](#) *Los Angeles Times*, "HMOs Perform Best for the Healthy, Doctors Say," 7/29/99 A1.

[24.](#) *Orange County Register*, "Victim's Troubles Prove Confusing to AIDS Activists," May 2, 1998 A16.

[25.](#) Reuters News Service, "Africa Greeted a Medicines Pact With Anger and Criticism," 8/28/03.

[26.](#) I do not mean by the term "double pandemic" to connote "*The Second Pandemic*" of AIDS-based discrimination treated in the videotape of that title produced by Amber Hollibaugh in 1987–1988. For a discussion, see Crimp (1988).

[27.](#) Jones' manipulation of live interrupt coverage falls far from the

varying goals centered around “identificatory mimesis” to guide community-specific educational public access television (Freedman 1998, 251) or activist video (Juhasz 1995, 75) as a framework for safer sex education or AIDS advocacy on television.

[28.](#) Sabatini’s claims may be weighed against the more rigorously detailed studies of media coverage of terrorist acts. See, for example, Paletz and Schmid, *Terrorism and the Media* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1992) for a useful collection.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Framing the unexpected

by Jean-Luc Lioult

The theoretician may be frustrated by the bipolarity of discourses dealing with documentary.⁽¹⁾

On the one hand, critics assume documentary's candid vision of candid eye, its fly on the wall techniques as effectively giving an accurate account of "actual occurrences in the phenomenal world." (Guynn).

On the other hand, discourses of fakery (vs. discourses of sobriety) are also used about documentary. These seem to blur the line between fiction and non-fiction in a way that is often more confusing than productive.

How can we escape this critical (double) bind ?

To provide my own account, I will here draw from my experience as a photographer as well as a documentary filmmaking teacher.

Operating protocols

Years ago, I got involved in a project about the Highway code with a group of artists. We found inspiration in road signs and planned to produce an exhibition. As a photographer I thus started to work but did not gather much material before making two determining decisions. I would focus on "no parking" signs, especially the handmade ones, those with a personal touch. And I would treat them according to a very precise operating protocol. If pictures were always taken with the same lens, always on a frontal axis, and in such way as to reduce every sign to the same scale, then I hoped to uncover and make evident some unsuspected, accidental or intentional variations in the making, use and life of those objects. That particular method of taking pictures meant that I resigned myself to not investing what used to be the photographer's pride: original subjects, sophisticated angles, striking composition or lighting. If shooting became a routine procedure, the camera somehow would lose its candidness. Conversely, the images —especially when grouped together— would gain an indexical strength in revealing an unnoticed variety that no reconstruction or manipulation could have simulated. The very uniformity conferred by the operating protocol was the surest means to

reveal remarkable variations.

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Highway code art





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Chance and the effect of the real

As a practitioner I keep favouring a non-interventionist attitude. As a theorist, I keep being fascinated by indexicality, by the sense of unforeseen authenticity, the value of unexpectedness some documentary images, or documentary films, are able to communicate, provided that they (appear to) grasp the essence of real. However, as a theorist, I also know that such a sense of authenticity is itself an effect.

In Roland Barthes' view the "effect of real" is created by the very unfunctionality of details that do not fulfil any office in particular except connoting the real. Barthes calls this "l'effet de réel," indicating how representations look paradoxically more real when they carry a lot of details of little, if any, significance. From that standpoint the credibility of documentary images is indeed guaranteed—or, at least, reinforced—by irregularity, and deviation. The presence of elements of little significance that do not obey the laws of representative efficiency help construct the feeling that "it can't be fake." In documentary practice, such unfunctional details are usually unplanned, fortuitous ones: residues. These portions of unexploited material happen by chance to acquire a paradoxical status offering clues about the authenticity of the take.

Noel Burch seems to be one of the very few cinema theorists to have speculated (in *A Praxis of Cinema*) on chance and its functions. He thus describes

"the fascination experienced by a creative artist when he contemplates and 'displays' objects or materials that he himself has not created,"

"the even greater satisfaction the artist experiences when he *reworks* (...) these materials fallen from another world..."

The decisive moment

Being fundamentally a photographer, I cannot avoid basing my reflection upon snapshot photography as an attempt for mastering space, place and the moment.

The decisive moment, as Cartier-Bresson tersely defined it, is

“the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as the precise organisation of forms which gives that event its proper expression.”

However, the state of the art, in snapshot photography, is not simply to release the shutter at the proper moment. Indisputably a major artist, Cartier-Bresson does not say everything about the process when he describes the photographer’s work as follows:

“A velvet hand, a hawk’s eye—these we should all have... If the shutter was released at the decisive moment, you have instinctively fixed a geometric pattern without which the photograph would have been both formless and lifeless.”
(*The Decisive Moment*, Simon & Schuster 1952)

The very notion of decisive moment is indeed quite ambiguous. It seems to concentrate [a whole sequence of operations] in one point in time. I myself came to understanding this in practice. Being no Cartier-Bresson, it took me a long time to realise that one cannot go chasing snapshots by:

- idling around, waiting for something unexpected—but interesting—to happen,
- grasping the camera, “recognising the significance as well as the organisation of form,” and pressing the shutter release button—to say nothing of focus and exposure adjustments that may be needed.

If one tries to work this way, what happens is, one does not get anything decisive at all. Decisive moments are fugitive ones, and while you are in the process of *deciding there is something decisive about them*, they’re gone.

The right person in the right place

In fact Cartier-Bresson himself gives another key:

“It sometimes happens that being unsatisfied you keep motionless, waiting for something to occur, sometimes everything comes untied and there will be no picture, but if for instance somebody happens to go past, then you follow their movement through the viewfinder frame, you wait, you wait... you shoot, and you go away with the feeling you have got something in your bag.”

This is fully congruent with my own experience as a photographer, as I shall show with two more examples.

Even before the “no parking project,” I was accustomed to take a number of pictures of a same pattern: a wall, in full frame, on a frontal axis, and a passer-by.

This simple scheme tended to construct some kind of relationship (on a plastic or anecdotal level) between the figure and the background.

One day I encountered an interesting graffiti in a street of Aix en Provence: a flashy, spray-painted kind of comic strip cowboy firing his gun: Pang! I prepared to take a picture. As I was waiting for a passer-by to act as an extra, a man came across and bent down not to be in the image, but looking very much as if he ducked down in order to avoid the cowboy's shot—which is aimed however to the other side of the frame. I then realised that I had taken no time to consider whether I should take the picture or not. The man had bent precisely but unexpectedly while I was releasing the shutter.

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Another decisive moment

Years later in Barcelona I experienced in an even stronger way what it is in fact to capture a “decisive moment” in snapshot photography.

As I was strolling around the port with my Leica in hand, a man sitting on the dock caught my attention. He could be a Moroccan immigrant, in worn out clothes, and seemed to enjoy throwing breadcrumbs to the fish, seagulls and pigeons all at the same time.



It looked amusing and I started taking pictures. I selected a high shutter speed. It was not very easy to get the whole scene in the frame.



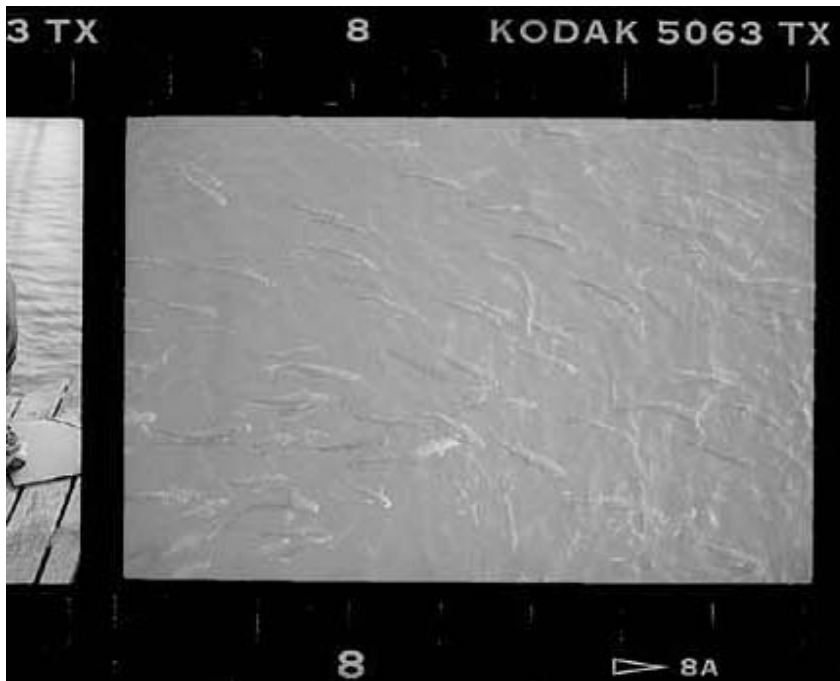
Another man was on the left side, and I stepped ahead and swung to the right to concentrate on the one with the birds around him. Thus I was able to get some converging lines in the frame also.



As I was starting to press the release button, I suddenly had a feeling of perfect synchronism, for in the same process the character turned round left with that big smile and for some reason made a gesture of lifting his right thumb up as to say OK. I have no idea of why he did so, but I insist: it is not that the man started and I then triggered. Indeed his movement was exactly simultaneous to my finger's movement pushing the button. I knew instantly this was a good picture.



(Unfortunately the fish cannot be seen. To see them you have to look to the next view.)



Such experiences lead me to a less naive notion of snapshot photography: the decisive, unexpected element happens within a frame that is already determined, which it comes to complement.

[Continued: What about the moving image?](#)

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What about the moving image?

Noel Burch (again) in “Chance and its Functions” also considers the kind of relation between expected and unexpected I refer to.

For one thing he notes, about fiction films and especially about filming in studios,

“[The] overcoming, or rather *banishing*, of the accidental developed hand in hand with the progressive enthronement of that ‘zero point in cinematic style.’”

And for another thing, discussing Lumière setting his camera up on the station platform at La Ciotat and waiting for the train to pull in, Burch observes:

“The bulk of the film’s action consisted of *unpredictable* gestures and movements of passengers getting off the train and people waiting for them on the platform.”

In fact, in Burch’s view, when Lumière was cranking the camera, “chance remained in complete control of the *mise en scène*.” However, Burch puts forward a notion close to mine:

“Both literally and figuratively, [Lumière] thus established a *frame*, thereby delimiting the area in which the unpredictable remainder of the action would occur.”

Similarly, operating protocols of documentary filmmaking often consist of establishing a (physical, social, figurative) frame within which the unpredictable (albeit somehow relied upon) may occur. I shall demonstrate this with my next example. This clip comes from a ten-minute long still shot produced by a group of students as an exercise during a documentary workshop. I am presenting here only the relevant excerpts.

Two homeless men remain on the doorstep of a building in a district near the town centre, drinking beer with their dogs around them.



Cars and buses passing by in the foreground contrast with the men's inactivity. Suddenly an attractive, high fashion young woman comes by. The men follow her with their eyes as she walks across frame to the left side of the image.





A moment later, a second woman, also dressed fashionably, in miniskirt and high boots, steps across the frame in a similar way; again the woman is followed by the men's eyes.





Then, after a while, the two women come back together from the off-screen space walking across from the left to the right of the frame, back to where they came from.





The effect is quite comical. But the shot also says a lot as well about social relations between genders and classes, between the well off and the underprivileged.



There is no doubt about the shot's documentary value. The long-focus, candid-camera shooting style, evidently implies no *mise en scène* at all (I had advised the students to pretend not to be filming). Conversely, the setting off of a specific space was the most determining factor. Every other possible angle or framing would have attenuated or even destroyed the incident's effect and meaning. Furthermore, the temporal cutting—a full ten-minute shot with no camera movement—allowed including the whole set of micro-events as well as the slack moments, which helped to build up the suspense pattern.

Using a constrained protocol for capturing spontaneous occurrences, framing a physical, social and figurative space, allows the documentarist to rely upon unforeseen events, which are unpredictable in their details but globally presumed to happen.

The method can be extended beyond such examples. Setting up a favourable stylistic device enables the cameraperson to grab occurrences of the unexpected. Here the unexpected seems to respond adequately to a specific sort of preparation or preliminary intentions.

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Encounters of the third kind

From a more theoretical point of view, I suggest this is a new way to go beyond the all-too-simple dichotomies used as distinctions in documentary criticism between the controlled and the uncontrolled, the staged and the spontaneous (or between fakery and ‘sobriety’).

Trevor Ponech (*What is non-fiction cinema*, 1999) distinguishes

“between two main categories of plans, corresponding to two broad strategies of authorially determining the content of non-fictional motion pictures.”

In terms of intentionality, he argues,

“Type I Non-Fictions have only schematic plans and highly flexible commitments ... [T]hey might simply intend to show whatever it is that ultimately happens to be recorded on the resultant footage.”

In contrast,

“Type II Non-Fictions ... result from intentions that are more rather than less restrictive of content” and “correspond to significantly more detailed plans.”

Ponech indeed suggests,

“... instead of looking for mutually exclusive classifications, it makes more sense to situate films somewhere along a gradual progression from minimal to maximal prevalence of authorial intentions. In all likelihood the majority of works are combination of Types I and II.”

Such a view avoids a clear-cut opposition and thus gives a better account of the various documentary filmmaking practices.

What I propose however is to conceive a dialectical relationship between Ponech’s two types, between planning the events and facing the irruption of spontaneous occurrences. In other terms, the “*authorial intentions*” of the filmmaker may create a third category if the intention is to *frame the unexpected*, to facilitate the upsurge of the unforeseen, rather than control the flow of events.

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Steps toward new strategies

(I'll rapidly refer to another example drawn from teaching practice, although I am not able to show a clip of images.)

I had another opportunity to confirm this idea with a group of almost absolute beginners in documentary filmmaking. They decided to film the work of trimmers chainsawing sycamore tree branches. I had asked them (again) to make ten-minute long shots with no camera movement. As they repeatedly tended to frame the workers balancing high in the trees with their chainsaws, I suggested they might shoot instead what happened on the ground below. I also asked them to delimit a reasonably narrow field. In their film, the frame was empty at first, then boughs started falling and banging down while the chainsaw's sound remained off-screen; some other men entered the frame now and again to collect the timber. These events were indeed expectable, but the result was undoubtedly better. The most striking, and unexpected, event happened when a big limb fell out and rolled toward the camera, stopping dramatically not far from us in the image's foreground.

In such a process, selecting a frame implies a twofold displacement, in space and time, so as to benefit the scene's *potential* development. The camera person does not select what he or she immediately perceives, but rather anticipates in what place and at what moment something more may happen.

I want to borrow my last example from an Iranian short film: *The Candidate* (Mohammad Shirvani, 1999)—a provocative, hybrid treatment in which an old lady walks up to young women in the streets of Teheran with a photograph of her son, urging the women to marry him. The old lady is an actress, in league with the filmmaker. She wears a wireless microphone and makes her fictitious offer to “real,” unwary passers-by. At the end the scene suggest that her (supposed) son has in fact died in the war. The film's first shot shows the following:

- In the background, the old breathless lady toils up some stairs, sits down for a pause then walks toward the camera.



•In the foreground, a couple formed by a soldier and a young woman enters the field. Due to the camera position and focal length, we first

see their legs only, before they go across and down the stairs in the back.



The shot condenses and summarises the film argument. When I showed the film to a group of students, most declared that such a shot was “obviously staged.” Although I cannot pretend that this is “life caught unawares,” I am convinced it does not just result from *mise en scène* either. It rather comes about as a combination of accurately selecting the place, space and moment. Then the camerapeople had to wait for the secondary characters to appear (it may have been a stroke of luck that a soldier and a young woman came), and perhaps the shot entailed someone off-screen waving to the older woman to stand up and move on at the proper moment. A device, in other words, can be well adapted to seizing elements that

are counted on, but not controlled—and mixing them with controlled events.

Filming the real implies creating opportunities by which it can enter the frame. In a more dialectical view of the hackneyed dilemmas of documentary—candidness, spontaneity, and veracity, versus staging, mastery, and expressivity—filming the real may require setting up formal, sometimes strict constraints that allow the upsurge of the unexpected, the variable, the unsettled within a concrete and symbolic frame which organizes and orders spontaneity's meaning. The documentarist does not pretend to capture the unpredictable ingenuously. At the same time, there is no need to claim that everything is staged, that everything is fiction from the moment an artist intends to seize something of the real. From the point of view of the documentarist, things are less simple but richer. In this case, a documentary *modus operandi* can favour a dialectics of the spontaneous and the arranged.

The most fruitful documentary strategies consist of establishing protocols within which the real can befall.

Note

[1.](#) This paper is based on (and developed from) a chapter of the author's book, *A l'enseigne du réel - penser le documentaire*, Publications de l'Université de Provence, 2004.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills (1996)



Recurring aerial view of Memphis AR, showing small patch of woods on right where bodies are found.



KAIT8 News shows these pictures of the victims shortly after the murder.

Paradise Lost I & II Documentary, gothic, and the monster of justice

by [Andy Opel](#)

“Fear on the streets might borrow the words and rubric of the movie house, although on the streets fear moves to a qualitatively different closure. The difference? Real people die” (Ingebretsen 2001, 9).

Or in this case, they end up on death row. This essay confronts the permeable boundaries of fiction and reality, narrative and documentary. *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills* (1996) and *Paradise Lost II: Revelations* (2001) are two powerful documentary films detailing the brutal murder of three eight year old boys and the ensuing trial and conviction of three “goth” teens in West Memphis, Arkansas. These films capture the crystalline refraction of the gothic imaginary as it circulates within and between popular culture, popular opinion, the news media and the U.S. criminal justice system. In a dynamic example of Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle and a Cultural Studies articulation of the active audience, these films chronicle the circuit of culture (du Gay, Hall et al. 1997) as it spirals into existence, transgressing boundaries of fact and fiction as it constitutes the social map. These films, combined with the audience reaction that has manifested an extensive website in response (www.wm3.org), portray a moving field of monstrosity, where all the subjects who become entangled in the story, including the filmmakers, become the object of a gothic, monstrous gaze, implicated in the actual crimes of murder and the virtual “crimes” of fandom and spectatorship.

The murders in these films are consistently referred to



KAIT8 News shows these pictures of the suspects. The news story cites “satanic ritual” as a possible motive. The documentary film incorporates repeated news clips, commenting on the power of representation.



Christopher Byers



Michael Moore

as “monstrous” and the concept of “the monster” plays a central role in this essay. These films represent a host of monsters—the teens accused of the crimes, the vindictive parents of the victims, the fans who rally in support of the accused and ultimately the U.S. justice system itself. As Ingebreetsen (2001) argues,

“monsters are less *agents* of social collapse than *announcers* that the collapse has already occurred” (emphasis in original text, 203).

In this case, these films allow us to witness the monster that has become our class based system of justice in the United States, announcing the collapse of our right to a fair and impartial jury. In a long tradition of dystopian fantasy, the *Paradise Lost* films represent stark images of the systemic horrors that haunt the small town courtrooms of the United States at the turn of the third millennium. Unlike the clarion call of dystopian fantasy and science fiction, these are *non-fiction* films and the stories they tell continue to live in modern day United States.

Paradise Lost films

The *Paradise Lost* films provide a compelling example of the ways gothic narratives move between and across the landscapes of contemporary U.S. culture. These films document the May 5th, 1993 murders of three eight year old boys, Stevie Branch, Christopher Byers and Michael Moore. The bodies of these boys were found naked, bound with shoelaces and dumped in a drainage ditch in a small patch of woods known as Robin Hood Hills, adjacent to the ever-present sprawl of ex-urban cityscape. One of the boys, Chris Byers, had been castrated, and they all had extensive contusions, cuts, and evidence of sexual assault (Leveritt, 2002). In a detailed analysis of the case, Mara Leveritt (2002) wrote:

“Within hours of the discovery of the bodies, rumors attributing the killings to Satanism had begun to circulate.”

This included a comment from West Memphis Police Department Chief Inspector Gary Gitchell that the murders may have been the result of “gang or cult



Stevie Branch



At a press conference Police Inspector Gary Gitchell announces the arrest of Baldwin, Misskelly, and Echols.



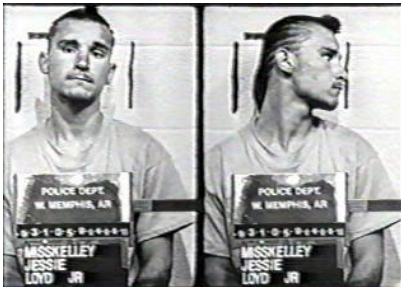
Police mugshots of Jason Baldwin and of ...

activity” and this comment came “despite the fact that no evidence suggested it” (p.14). This early narrative of gothic horror came to dominate the case from the first hours of the discovery of the bodies to the on-going appeals that continue through the winter of 2004.

The film *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills* (1996), picks up this gruesome crime shortly after it occurred. Filmmakers Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky, working for HBO, begin the film with local TV news reports that three teens had been arrested and charged with the crimes. These teens; Jessie Misskelly, Jason Baldwin and Damien Echols, are readily identified as the “kids who wear black” and who turn out to have “occult” interests. This first film documents the trials of these three teens, beginning with the trial of Jessie Misskelly. Misskelly was tried separately from the other two because of a confession he signed after a lengthy interrogation without a lawyer or his parents present. Misskelly was convicted of First Degree Murder in the death of Michael Moore and second degree murder in the deaths of Christopher Byers and Stevie Branch. He was sentenced to life in prison without parole for the murder of Michael Moore and two additional twenty year terms, to be served consecutively, for the other two murders. This conviction was based largely on a signed confession (available online at www.wm3.org) that was riddled with errors and contradictions involving the time and manner in which the murders took place.

Misskelly decided not to testify against Damien and Jason during their trial. Despite the lack of *any* physical evidence connecting them to the crimes, Damien was convicted of first degree murder and sentenced to death by lethal injection and Jason was convicted of second degree murder and sentenced to life in prison without parole.

Throughout this film, the directors had access to a wide range of people involved in the trials. This access included cameras in the courtroom, in home interviews with the parents of the victims and the parents of the accused, interviews with both the defense and prosecution team and repeated interviews with the three boys accused of the murders. These interviews and live action scenes continually refer to “evil” and “monsters” as the community grasped for language to describe the horror of these crimes. The



Jessie Misskelley are the first images the news media circulates of the suspects, framing them as convicts.



Damien Echols in detention. His hair length and color are repeatedly cited as evidence of his satanic worship.



Todd and Diane Moore, parents of victim Michael Moore.

references to evil were so pervasive that initially, the filmmakers themselves were caught up in what they describe as hysteria.

“We were of the opinion we were making a film about guilty kids. And we were pretty far away from Damien at the hearing, across a pretty big room. He was brought out in shackles and an orange prison suit, and we were in back with the press, and at one point he cranes his neck and looks around. And Bruce and I jabbed each other like, ‘Oh god, he’s so evil, did you see that look he gave everybody?’ and we just felt all this evil. There was this murmur through the crowd, ‘Oooh look at Damien, he’s so evil, ooooo.’ And then later I sat down and met him, and within five minutes of talking to him, not only did I feel he was innocent, but all that evil that I had projected on him washed away. And I was embarrassed that I had fallen for the trap” (Yabroff, 1996).

The “trap” of stereotypes, monsters and gothic horror dominates this film, depicting the expected horrors of a murder trial at the same time that it reveals the unexpected horror of publicly funded indigent defense in a capital murder case. The film offers a snapshot of the process whereby fears that are stoked by the culture industries take root in America’s heartland and bear the fruit of prejudice. Because the accused teens wore black and dressed in “goth” style, the police and many local community members were quick to assign blame, despite the lack of physical evidence.

The second film, *Paradise Lost II: Revelations* (2001), documents the audience response to the first film as audience members formed a support group for the convicted boys and attempted to draw national attention to the appeals trials of Damien Echols and Jason Baldwin. These fans developed a website, raised money, hired trial experts to re-examine evidence and traveled to Arkansas for the appeals trials. While the justice system is a continued focus of the film, the interaction of the “fans” and the community of West Memphis dominates this second chapter in an ongoing saga. The filmmakers were not granted access to cameras in the courtroom for the appeals trials so



Melissa Byers, mother of victim Christopher Byers. Her husband Mark, the child's stepfather, plays a central role in both films.



Pam Hobbs, mother of victim Stevie Branch, here interviewed by local news media. The film constantly draws attention to the process of news making.

instead rely on outside interviews with the trial judge, prosecutor, the accused and the host of fans and community members who gathered outside the courthouse to both support and condemn the two convicted boys turned men.

The team of “outsiders” who gathered in Arkansas to witness the trial, self named “Support the West Memphis 3,” were viewed with suspicion by the victim’s families as well as the local news media. Their efforts were equated with fans who worship serial killers at the same time that they brought with them high profile experts to testify in the trial. In addition to the tensions between the locals and the outsiders, the filmmakers explore the enduring suspicions around one of the victim’s step father, Mark Byers. Mark plays a prominent role in both films, often mugging for the camera and performing dramatic stunts such as making mock graves for the accused or shooting pumpkins in effigy of Damien Echols. In the second film, we learn that Mark’s wife has died of undetermined causes and since her death, Mark has had a number of encounters with the law over drug possession, violence and theft.

The most compelling area of suspicion of Mark Byers as the real killer of the three boys revolves around the testimony of the forensic pathologist hired by the West Memphis 3 support group. This pathologist argues that autopsy photos reveal a bite mark on the face of the Christopher Byers, the step son of Mark Byers. This evidence, combined with a series of evasions from Mark Byers as to why he had all his teeth removed, leaves a cloud of suspicion over Mark Byers. It is the interaction between audience support group and Mark Byers that drives the later part of the second film and demonstrates a dynamic example of the completed circuit of culture, where audience members appropriate a media text and turn it into a lived culture.

[Continued: Documentary and gothic narrative](#)

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Documentary and gothic narrative



Canted angle from a “crop dusters” POV of the trailer park where the accused lived. Here rows of corn were turned into rows of (im)mobile homes.



Jessie Misskelley, Sr., father of accused,

The *Paradise Lost* films document the process whereby these convictions took place, providing vivid detail of the people and places that shaped these stories. Beyond a tale of “wrongful conviction,” these films act as a catalyst in the circuit of culture, accelerating the process of cultural reproduction as gothic narratives weave between the real and the unreal.

The tensions between documentary and narrative film have been a contested terrain for many years, with scholars attempting to define the boundaries of technique and content that differentiate the two traditions (Nichols 1991; Nichols 1994; Ponech 1999; Bruzzi 2000). Nichols (1991) early and influential theorization of documentary film outlined “modes of representation” and traced the history of approaches to the genre. Nichols (1994) went on to explore the “blurred boundaries” of non-fiction film and stressed the filmmaker/audience relationship in the meaning making process, arguing that

“signification resides within the selection and arrangement of indexical representations, not in indexicality per se any more than in things themselves” (xi).

In other words, images are only trusted as “real” based on the context in which they are produced and consumed. Ponech (1999) emphasizes the role of the filmmaker in differentiating fiction from non-fiction film, calling documentaries “cinematic assertions” where filmmakers “openly indicate something to somebody else” (11). Bruzzi (2000) builds on this theoretical lineage, arguing that the documentary film is a “perpetual negotiation between the real event and its representation” (9). Documentary film occupies a space where fiction and non-fiction intersect, offering a powerful site to examine the circuit of culture as it moves within and between the imaginary and the real.

The *Paradise Lost* films fall into this contested terrain,



who lives in this (im)mobile home, provides the signed, coerced confession that becomes the major evidence in the trials.



Joe Hutchinson, father of accused Damien Echols.



Deputy Prosecutor John Fogelman repeatedly defends how police got Misskelly's confession, in an unrecorded process.

merging courtroom footage, traditional sit-down interviews, live action shooting and “staged” encounters where participants can be seen shooting guns or lighting fires at the site of the murders in an act of ritual cleansing. Drawing primarily on what Nichols (1991) has called an “interactive mode” of documentary; Berlinger and Sinofsky keep their presence invisible throughout both films. This technique involves removing the questions asked of participants, editing together responses in such a way that the social actors sound as if they are speaking extemporaneously, telling their story in their words.

This technique contrasts with an “expository mode” where an omniscient narrator provides context and often interprets events for the viewer. In the interactive mode,

“textual authority shifts toward the social actors recruited: their comments and responses provide a central part of the film’s argument” (Nichols 1991, 44).

In the first film (1996), Berlinger and Sinofsky had extraordinary access to the families of the victims and the accused, cameras in the courtroom, defense lawyer meetings with the defendants, interviews with the prosecutor and the judge as well as a range of comments from people in the local community over the course of the two years (1993-5) that it took to produce the film.

Although Berlinger and Sinofsky strive to keep attention focused on the social actors and not on the filmmakers, the first film has a couple of reflexive moments, and the second film (2001) is colored by a reflexivity that models a pop culture example of Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle where the physical act of observing a phenomenon is said to change the phenomenon itself, thus calling into question the very possibility of neutral observation that has become the cornerstone of the scientific method. During the trial of Damien Echols and Jason Baldwin, police investigator Gary Gitchell is asked about a knife that has been introduced as evidence. Gitchell says that the knife was given to him by “Joe and the folks at HBO.” Text is



Mark Byers and Todd Moore shoot pumpkin effigies of the accused. Mark Byers often performs staged events for cameras, seemingly attempting to form public opinion through image.



Mark and Melissa Byers at Christopher's grave in a staged mourning scene. It's symbolically complicated as the shadow of a star atop a Christmas tree gets cast on Mark's forehead.



The camera zooms in to

used to tell the viewers that a knife was given to the filmmakers by Mark Byers, the step-father of Christopher, one of the victims. This is one of a few instances during the first film where reflexivity emerges, drawing attention to the filmmakers' active participation in the development of the story.

“The reflexive mode of representation gives emphasis to the encounter between the filmmaker and viewer rather than filmmaker and subject” (Nichols 1991, 60).

In this case, the filmmaker did not address the audience directly but the illusion of a faceless, voiceless, objective camera operator was shattered and the audience was temporarily reminded of the active engagement of the filmmakers. This moment is problematic for the film because this film and the follow-up are predicated on a search for the truth, the power of evidence, and an on-going attempt to identify the murderer/s of the three boys. Reflexive strategies draw attention to the limits of communicative practice and “emphasizes epistemological doubt” (61). For the reflexive filmmaker,

“realist access to the world, the ability to provide persuasive evidence, the possibility of indisputable argument, the unbreakable bond between an indexical image and that which it represents – all these notions prove suspect” (Nichols 1991, 60).

In a film about the quality of evidence and the search for the perpetrators, “persuasive evidence” becomes very important.

The second film contains core elements of reflexivity, though the filmmakers continue to avoid any on-camera images of themselves and only an occasional question posed in an interview can be heard. The reflexivity that runs throughout this piece appears through numerous references to the impact of the making of *Paradise Lost* on the first trials and a desire to avoid those same impacts during the appeals process.

Thus, *Paradise Lost II: Revelations* (2001), picks up the plight of the boys turned men—Damien Echols, Jason Baldwin and Jessie Misskelly—who had been convicted in the trials documented in the first film. This second film chronicles the appeals process, with the added attention to the audience support group that

capture this striking image. The five-pointed star is associated with Satan worship. The contrast between this image and Byers' pious preaching indicates both films' suspicion that Byers is the real killer.



Dan Stidham, Public Defender for Misskelly, never tried a capital case prior to this. He is the only member of the original defense teams to continue to work on the cases.



Damien Echols takes the stand during his trial.

emerged in response to the first film. The impact of this group will be examined in detail in shortly, but for now, it is important to recognize the power the first film had on the initial trials and to examine the response to this impact in the second film.

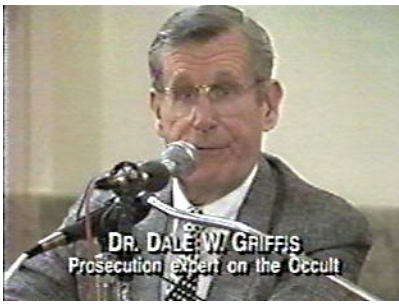
Interestingly, the film also bears a resemblance to a principle in physical science, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. Heisenberg, in describing subatomic particles, said:

“The more precisely the position is determined, the less precisely the momentum is known in this instant, and vice versa” (Heisenberg 1927).

This notion of uncertainty has been lifted from the hard sciences and interpreted by a host of social science and humanities scholars, often cited as a foundational argument in the limitations of science as a way of knowing. Heisenberg's description of atomic particles is often used to make the argument that the very process of measuring alters that which you seek to measure. In this case, we can see the act of filmmaking altering the first trial in a number of specific ways. First, HBO paid a number of the participants for their participation in the film, giving equal honorariums to the three families of the victims and the three families of the accused, further blurring the lines between social actors and paid actors (Leveritt 2002). These payments were essential to the first trial because of the lack of resources available to the public defenders assigned to the cases. This money was used to pay a number of expert witnesses who testified for the defense, tangibly altering the trial process.

Ironically, in the second film, a crucial significant argument in the appeals case was the idea that the first trial had been significantly compromised by the presence of the filmmakers and the financial incentives offered by HBO. Despite the controversy over money, HBO continued to pay subjects in the second film, with notable attention to Mark Byers, who was described as “starring in his own horror movie” by one film critic (Leveritt 2002). Byers is highly visible in both films, taking on a range of personalities from doting husband, pious churchgoer, and vindictive father of a murder victim.

The interplay of money, class tensions, and access to quality judicial representation conspire to provide



Dale Griffis is the prosecution expert on the occult. He got his education through the mail, never attending a class or taking a test. His folksy nature contrasts with defense experts' professionalism and credibility.



Richard Ofshe, defense expert on false confession, skewers the prosecution on the confession's integrity, but his testimony does not convince the jury. He is from out of state. The prosecution discredits him by declaring him an "outsider."

extremely candid footage in both films, while at the same time tainting that footage with the power imbalance of a New York HBO film team and a small Midwestern community hungry for justice. On the one hand, the power of the film(s), with the resulting national and international attention, has transformed what might have otherwise been another case of neo-liberal (in)justice. At the same time, the money and influence infused into this case through the filmmaking process altered the process and introduced new financial motivations. Thus the two films are deeply intertwined with these trials and the apparently "neutral" filmmakers have moved to the center of an on-going controversy.

Class, capital and American gothic

Two recurring images in both *Paradise Lost* films reveal the class tensions embedded in this small town story of murder and monsters. First, Berlinger and Sinofsky use repeated shots of low aerial footage of the town and site of the murders. This aerial footage is often canted, altering the landscape, providing a crop duster pilot's glimpse on farmland turned light industrial sprawl. The second recurring image is that of the trailer parks and mobile homes where both the victim's families and the families of the accused lived. These images are usually accompanied by the heavy metal music of *Metallica* and serve as brief interludes from the interview driven storyline. This music is a reminder of the popular "goth" culture that is so central to these trials and the perceptions of "satanic" worship on the part of the accused. The filmmakers remind the audience of the ubiquity of *Metallica's* music and the Hollywood marketing behind teen goth culture. More importantly, these images play a central role in locating this story at a particular time and place, drawing attention to the connections between people and space.

In writing about the Grant Wood painting *American Gothic*, Eric Savoy argues that the house behind the couple in the foreground plays a central role in the symbolic power of the painting. This house is said to contain a "historical preterite" that "haunts the national couple." This farm house is said to

"bring forward the underside, the Otherness, of the narratives of national self construction" (p. 18).

In a similar fashion, Berlinger's and Sinofsky's repeated use of iconic images of trailer parks and mobile homes can be seen as the contemporary modern updates of Wood's gothic farmhouse. In this case, the farm house of the working class has been replaced by manufactured homes, the rows of crops replaced by rows of equally linear homes and trailer parks. Where Savoy raises questions about "the tenant" that resides in the haunted house of gothic fiction, Berlinger and Sinofsky take us inside the homes of "monsters" to meet the tenants who reside within the "haunted" mobile home.

What we see is the banality of U.S. culture in the late twentieth century: televisions and cigarettes, coveralls with names embroidered on the upper left label, inscribed with the marks of manual labor; rusted cars; and marginal dental care. These are the families and people who lived with the "monsters," identified as Other by their location within the "scary" and "dangerous" world of the trailer park, a once transient place turned permanent township of class segregation. The (im)mobile homes have ceased to move as there is no place to go with the frontier long closed and the encroachment of the gated community incessantly pushing these communities closer to the ex-urban skin we drive through on our way to some better place.

This ex-urban skin, when seen from the air, reveals the changes of the American heartland landscape since Wood's painting. Berlinger and Sinofsky provide us with a crop duster's point of view, swooping down on the highways and patches of asphalt that divide and connect so much of modern United States. This is the location where the murders happened, but it is also the industrial landscape that is intimately connected to the people who live and work in the (im)mobile homes that haunt these films. From this aerial view, we see the landscape cut up and divided by highways, dividing lines that recede to the horizon line, locating West Memphis as a place between, a stopping point, a place to refuel. These highways and asphalt patches parse the farmland where Wood's farming couple struggled in what Jonathan Raban called

"that sad and unlamented West where
bitterness and fury were the natural
offspring of impossibly great expectations"
(quoted in Savoy, p. 18).

The unseen pilot of the plane that gives us this vantage

point remains silent, a specter of a crop-duster in search of fields that have not been violated and encroached upon by the expansion of capital, or possibly in search of “pests” that have infested this cultural crop. From the air, we see the small patch of woods—bordered by highway and fast food—a remnant of the great stands of Midwestern hardwoods leveled as the Europeans moved west. Amid the noise and dangers of interstate highways, this patch of woods was a natural refuge for kids in search of a stream to play in and a tree to climb. In further class coding, we come to know the victims and the accused as kids without the benefits of after school programs, private music lessons, or stay at home parents. With the unstructured time of youth, these kids sought the comforts and timeless attraction of the woods, though in this instance, those woods were bounded by the transience of industrialism, a mobility that lies in stark contrast to the immobility of the homes where they live.

What emerges from this collection of images of the land and the homes of West Memphis is a new portrait of the modern American Heartland, a place transformed by industrial agribusiness and increasingly referred to as “fly-over country” as the captains of the culture industries fly between New York and LA. The very gothic imaginary that is so carefully crafted in the cultural centers of the East and West Coasts takes root in the people and practices across the continent and increasingly around the world. These films demonstrate the tangible implications of a carefully constructed culture of fear. In a very visible sense, we can see what Ingebreetsen means when he argues that “monsters warn” (p. 4).

Paradise Lost (1996, 2001) offers a stark warning about the intersection of class and justice, and the political economy of a criminal justice system that is balkanized according to income. Taking place during a similar time period as the OJ Simpson trial with its 24 hour news coverage, teams of high profile lawyers and endless speculation about evidence and motives, this case took place far from the probing camera lens were it not for Berlinger and Sinofsky. Their attention to the “monsters” of West Memphis warns us of the dangers posed by a monstrous system of capital driven justice. Halberstam (1995) argues that the gothic monster

“is an economic form in that it condenses various racial and sexual threats to nation, capitalism, and the bourgeoisie in one

body” (p.3).

In contrast, Berlinger and Sinofsky recast the monster as capitalism itself—the very system that allows for justice to be predicated on access to quality legal representation, access that is denied to most Americans and whose very denial is effaced by judicial representations that valorize power and celebrity (O.J. Simpson) or trivialize everyday life (Judge Judy). While these films follow the search to find the monstrous killer(s) of three eight year old boys, they also probe the intersection of class, culture and the U.S. justice system. Interestingly, the murders took place in “Robin Hood Hills,” another marker of class tensions where stealing from the rich and giving to the poor has been replaced by the poor stealing from each other. Unlike the Sherwood of old, where the road brought riches to “merry men,” this road is a highway that divides a community, leaving behind effluence and roadkill.

[Continued: Activism](#)

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Active audience and the West Memphis Three



Jason Baldwin in detention awaiting trial along with Echols. Misskelly is tried separately.



Damien Echols holds his son for the first time, near the end of his first trial. The child is born after his arrest. No physical evidence links Echols to the crime, but he must stay in jail before the trial.

The *Paradise Lost* films present textbook examples of what cultural theorists have dubbed the “active” audience. Hall (1980) articulated a communication model where the audience “decoding” process is central to the meaning of the text. This active work on the part of the audience in the meaning making process is said to be influenced in part by an audience member’s social position and attitudes. In this case, some audience members of the first *Paradise Lost* film responded with time, energy and money, rallying in support of what they perceived to be a miscarriage of justice.

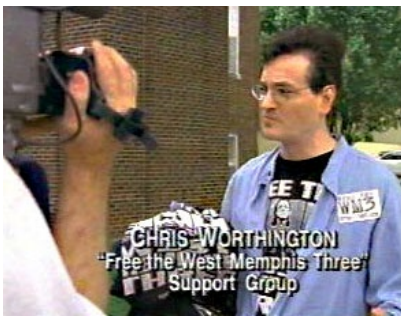
The most visible sign of this audience response is the website www.wm3.org, a site developed to bring attention to the cases of Jessie Misskelly, Jason Baldwin and Damien Echols, since dubbed, “The West Memphis Three” (WM3). This website contains an extensive archive of documents related to the case and continues to serve as a clearinghouse for new information about the ongoing appeals process. In addition, the site allows visitors to donate money to a legal fund through email money transfer services such as *PayPal*. An early result of this active audience reaction to the first film was the ability to hire experts to reexamine the evidence in the case. This process, and the involvement of the West Memphis 3 support group, became a significant element of the second film, *Paradise Lost II: Revelations* (2001). The second film then contains a strong reflexive element, as the very presence of a support group at the appeal trials indicates the influence of the first film and an ongoing interaction between subjects, filmmakers and audience.

In the second film, we get to see members of the support group who developed the website, raised money and traveled to West Memphis for Damien’s appeal trial. These people speak about their visceral



Echols is convicted and receives a death sentence. Here he is shown leaving the courthouse after sentencing.

Revelations:
Paradise Lost II (2001)



Chris Worthington sells tee shirts outside the courthouse. He is a member of a support group raising money for appeals trial legal expenses for Baldwin and Echols.



The cameras in these

reaction to seeing teens charged, arrested and convicted solely on the basis that they “wore black” and explored occult literature. In a focus group session with Mara Leveritt, (the reporter who authored the book *Devils Knot: The True Story of the West Memphis Three*), Anna Macek from Houston, Texas, describes the reaction of her co-workers to the news that “they had caught those freaks that did that to those kids.” When Anna asked why they thought the boys were guilty, they responded, “Look at them, look at the way they dress, of course they did it.” Bill Pritchason from New Jersey attempts to explain why people traveled across the country to witness an obscure trial in a small town:

“I watched *Paradise Lost*, I also wore black t-shirts, I was an alienated teenager, and I think that might be the initial attraction that brings people in. But I think that what’s really important and that brings people together to the point where people travel cross country to come to Jonesboro, Arkansas on your week of vacation are the more important issues such as justice, such as a corrupt, incompetent police force and justice system working in a vacuum here in Arkansas, when nobody’s watching, that’s why I’m here. I don’t I don’t want them to think they can operate in the dark, kinda like a mushroom, and grow” (Berlinger and Sinofsky 2001).

Given the prevalence of alienated youth, black clothing and heavy metal music fans in modern day United States, concerns about a trial based largely on how three teenagers looked provoked a strong response from these audience members. They acted on their concerns, developed a website and raised a significant amount of money that has been used to attract high quality legal representation for the appeals trials.

In the second film, the supporters of the accused are themselves accused of being a group of serial-killer fans. In one scene outside the courthouse, Mark Byers, stepfather of one of the victims, accuses the supporters of being like the fans of serial killers such as Ted Bundy or Jeffrey Dahmer. The irony here is that fans of serial killers are attracted to them because of what they did, what Halberstam has called an attraction to “fear and desire” (Halberstam 1995). In this case, members of the West Memphis Three support group appear to be

images remind us of the ever-present culture industries. The media circulates images of the trials which inspire action, such as that of the WM3 group, which then affects the media, especially through the group's website, www.wm3.org.



The tee shirts later show up on *Dawson's Creek*. Contemporary television, the news, and political discourse circulate many of the same images within and between reality and fiction.



The first WM3 group was formed as a spontaneous audience reaction to the first *Paradise Lost* film. It is not supported by HBO or the documentary filmmakers. Here is a group

motivated by what the accused did *not* do. They are motivated out of a fear of a corrupt and unaccountable judicial system that would allow for the conviction of three people without any physical evidence linking them to the crimes.

In another example of the weaving of fiction and non-fiction narratives with gothic images crossing back and forth between imagination and reality, the West Memphis Three support group has spawned a wide range of cultural attention and visibility. The TV series *Dawson's Creek* made two visible references to the West Memphis Three. First, in the closing final episode of the 2001 season, Joshua Jackson said, "Peace. Out. Free the West Memphis Three" during a "pivotal scene"; and in the 2002 season, a "new series regular" wore a "Free the West Memphis Three" tank top during an episode (Bakken, Pashley et al. 2003). Other instances of Hollywood support for the cause include Eddie Vedder of Pearl Jam wearing a WM3 t-shirt during a *Touring Band* 2000, a VH1 program, and public comments by Trey Parker and Matt Stone, co-creators of *South Park*. After receiving the Best Musical Performance award at the MTV Movie Awards in 2001, Parker closed his acceptance speech with, "Free the West Memphis Three" (Bakken, Pashley et al. 2003). In addition, a benefit CD was produced (by Danny Bland and Scott Parker of Aces & Eights Records) including tracks from Joe Strummer of *The Clash*, Tom Waits and Steve Earle.

This range of media attention is in no small part a result of the work of Berlinger and Sinofsky and the efforts of an active, engaged audience. Though the films have played a major role in garnering popular attention to the cases, fan response has since eclipsed any visible ongoing efforts of the filmmakers to support the West Memphis Three. Though many scholars have explored the ways that gothic narratives move from the imaginary to the concrete, here we see examples of the completed cultural circuit, where gothic and satanic fears resulted in a trial based on appearances, that in turn inspired entertainers and fiction writers to weave the concrete back into the imaginary. The lived cultures of this gothic narrative, informed and deformed by the gothic imaginary, were appropriated by the culture industries and reinserted into a narrative context.

Refracting monsters

Over the course of the two *Paradise Lost* films,

meeting during the appeals trial. All these people traveled to West Memphis AK on their own to witness the appeals process.



Mara Levitt, journalist and author, interviews members of the WM3 group. She seeks to understand this activist audience reaction to these murder cases.



Bill Prichason, WM3 supporter.

Berlinger and Sinofsky take the audience back and forth between guilt and sympathy, accusation and allegation. The extensive, intimate interviews with a broad range of people involved in this crime offer a human face to the often monstrous associations. From the three boys on trial to Mark Byers, the camera hungry step-father who “dost protest too much,” to the community members who are quick to judge based on stereotypes, to the (over)zealous supporters of the accused, to the filmmakers themselves who are accused of exploiting vulnerable people for entertainment values—monsters abound in these films and the filmmakers offer no easy answers for the crime or the social response to a modern day witch hunt. Although these films avoid a conclusive judgment, the monster that becomes most visible in the end is not a person dressed in black committing murder but rather the monster of our judicial system.

One of the first “monstrous” actions of the judicial process took place when the three boys were detained for questioning. Jessie Misskelly, who was said to have an IQ of 67 and was described as “slow” and “mildly retarded” was questioned for almost twelve hours without his parents or a lawyer present. The vast majority of this questioning was not tape recorded and no notes exist as to what went on, though Mara Levitt (2002) details some of the process, pieced together from interviews with Misskelly and the police investigators present. This questioning culminated in a signed (printed, as Misskelly never learned cursive [Levitt 2002]) confession that became the post on which hang all the other circumstantial evidence on. Despite the horrific legal procedure that led to the signed confession, Judge Burnett allowed the confession to be included in the trial. A tape was made of the final hour leading up to the confession and the transcript becomes a point of contention in Misskelly’s trial.

In *Paradise Lost*, the filmmakers use courtroom footage of Misskelly’s lawyer questioning Gary Gitchell about the Misskelly confession. We hear a recording of the confession where Misskelly initially says the murders happened in the morning, is corrected by Gitchell a number of times until the murders are finally said to take place in the evening, the suspected time determined by the coroner.

This leading line of questioning calls into question Misskelly’s confession but more significantly reveals a



Brent Turvey, Criminal Profiler hired by the defense, offers testimony that reveals the tangible difference that money and expertise makes to a criminal defense. From the original crime scene photos, he identifies bite marks, neglected in the first trial but a central controversy in appeals.



Dan Stidham, original Public Defender, serves as pro bono defense lawyer during appeals, steadfastly supporting the defendants for years.

monstrous judicial process where a minor is coerced into agreeing to a predetermined set of facts, without the benefit of a parent or lawyer present. Gitchell claimed Misskelly waived his rights to an attorney; however, given Misskelly's age and education level, it is unlikely Misskelly understood the implications of such a decision. The legal dispute over this confession raises another monstrous aspect of this trial: class.

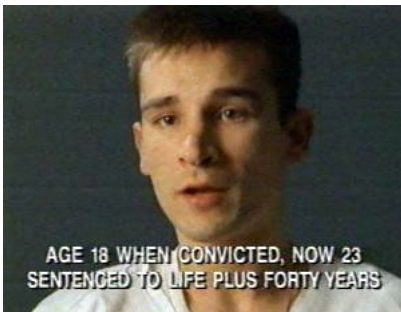
In their response to the confession evidence, the defense brought in an "expert on false confessions," Dr. Richard J. Ofshe. We see Ofshe point out "eight revisitings of the question of the time that the killings occurred" (Berlinger and Sinofsky 1996) and that the correct answer of "at night" was suggested to Misskelly. Once that suggestion was made, Misskelly adopted this as his story after seven previous contradictory statements. Ofshe argues that this is a classic example of getting someone to accept something out of pressure and suggestion and that this occurs numerous times during the small part of the twelve-hour interrogation that was taped.

The prosecution's response to this was to attack Dr. Ofshe's fees. Despite the fact that this was a capital murder case, the jury was is not informed that the defense is allotted a maximum of \$1000 to pay for expert witnesses and the state did not allot any more money to support a proper defense of the indigent accused. In the film, we see the prosecutor question Ofshe about his \$300/hr fee, and Ofshe is heard correcting this, stating that he charges \$150/hr. for consultation and \$300/hr for time spent in court. The prosecution then asserts that if Ofshe does not give the results the client wants, he will does not get the \$300/hr. courtroom fee. The Prosecution also noted his "California" residence, locating him outside the American heartland where this satanic panic is taking place.

This example of attention to money and expertise in a small town courtroom demonstrates the gaps in a balkanized judicial system where access to quality legal representation is not only a matter of wealth, but also



Ironically, the same judge presides over both initial and appeals trials. This one man, Judge Burnett, can decisively shape a capital conviction in spite of his personal investment in making the appeals trial consistent with the first trial outcome.



Jessee Misskelly five years after his first conviction.



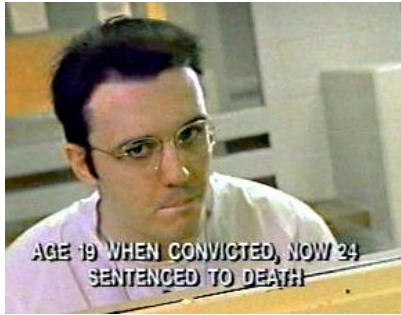
Jason Baldwin in prison during the first appeals trial.

connected to place. In this case, the location offered a jury pool that appeared suspicious of “experts” hired from “California.” Though his logic was sound and his credentials impressive, Ofshe failed to convince twelve people in Arkansas that a marginally literate teenage was manipulated by a team of skilled police officers.

The mirror image of the previous example adds more detail to the monstrous judicial process represented in these films. In this second example, Dr. Dale W. Griffis, an “occult expert,” is brought in by the prosecution during Jason and Damien’s trial. Given the lack of a confession or any physical evidence linking Damien to the murders, the prosecution built the case on the resonance of the gothic narrative, tapping a “satanic panic” that occurred from the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s (Greek 2003) and continues to drive public fears and anxieties today, as evidenced by the cult and satanic theories surrounding the high profile murder trial of Lacy Peterson. The proliferation of these satanic fears has been attributed to “talk show hosts” and “conspiracy theorists” who attempt to link heavy metal music and teen culture with a discourse of cultural decay and an extremist Christian vision of the “end of days” where the arrival of Satan was said to be imminent (Greek 2003). Griffis testified that he has observed “occult” people “wearing black fingernails, having their hair painted black and wearing black t-shirts.”

This “expert” testimony is then revealed by the defense team to be the opinions of a man who earned his Ph.D. from a mail order catalogue and never attended *any* classes to earn this degree. Thus we see a prosecution team hiring an unqualified expert in their attempt to cast this as an occult crime. This is not a mere oversight but a patently cynical attempt to convince a jury that anyone who “looks occult” is capable of heinous crimes and should be judged guilty until proven innocent. This small-town, self-made expert, is another marker of class and place, where even the state resources to hire experts are limited and the cultural location of the expert supercedes credentials, resulting in a colloquial figure who legitimates the translation of the gothic narrative from the everyday imaginations of the jury to

the real lives of the accused.



Damien Echols on death row during appeals trial.

Foreshadowing a 2002 U.S. government “total information awareness campaign,” Griffis goes on to analyze a book library that Damien had in his bedroom, noting chapters on “the devil” and “witchcraft.” Damien becomes guilty of reading the wrong material, discovered not through a database of books he checked out but through good old fashioned possession, as the book was found in his bedroom. This possession moved from being 9/10ths of the law to being all that is needed to prove satanic intent. By simulating the role of an “expert,” Griffis, the prosecution, and the filmmakers collapse the real and the virtual into a postmodern moment dissolving the “supposed distance between images and diffuse physicality” (Hogle 2001), for Griffis was not an occult expert, he merely embodied the image of one in a courtroom.

The judicial process becomes the most significant monster in these films, marked by class and place. The support group that formed in response to the first film raised money and hired experts to challenge the limitations of the first trials, and their presence and intentions were located by their otherness, as outsiders from the big city, there to meddle in local affairs. Like the resented white civil rights workers of the 50s and 60s who went South to help with voter registration, the WM3 supporters were viewed as part of a long tradition of meddling outsiders, interfering where they did not belong. The appeals trials documented in the second film were overseen by the same judge as the first trials, again revealing a provincialism and class-driven justice system where those who cannot afford highly skilled lawyers are forced to appear and reappear before a small circle of decision makers. This in effect is the “darkness” Bill Pritchason spoke of, the tangible limits of public defenders and a justice system divided along class lines.

[Continued: Indigent defense in the United States](#)

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Indigent defense in the United States



Burk Sauls, a founding member of the WM3 group.



Kathy Bakken, active member of the WM3 group.



These films confront the monster of a class based justice system. The first trial took place during the O.J. Simpson trials and the contrast could not be more revealing. Director Joe Berlinger said,

"Paradise Lost is the flip-side to O.J. — it's poor man's justice, when you can't afford a dream team. There was a ton of evidence to convict O.J. and he walked, and in this case three poor teens had a mountain of reasonable doubt and they were convicted" (Yabroff 1996).

The Sixth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guarantees all persons accused of a crime the right to counsel in their defense, and the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that states must provide an attorney to any person accused of a crime (Spangenberg & Beeman 1995). This system has been left to individual states, who in many cases have allowed counties to both fund and oversee management of their public defender system. The result has been widespread disparities in the funding and organization of public defender systems. The systems are chronically underfunded, and case loads for public defenders consistently exceed state bar association guidelines, often by a factor of ten.

Examples include Wisconsin, where anyone earning more than \$3000 annually is deemed able to afford a lawyer, resulting in 11,000 people who faced trial unrepresented in 2003 and Lake Charles, LA where two lawyers handle over 2500 felony and 4000 misdemeanor cases a year (Weinstein 2004). Regional disparities and rising caseloads have stressed a system that was established to provide a minimum of protection for a vulnerable population. Prior to 2002, Texas was one of four states that provided no state money for indigent defense; and in 2002, Arkansas had the lowest state and county per capita funding of indigent defense of any of twelve Southern States

Burk Sauls, speaking about the case on Court TV. Here an audience member turned expert can now feed information back into the circuit of culture.



Mark Byers, possibly involved as a perpetrator, and Burk Sauls are being interviewed for a Court TV segment. The camera in the shot draws attention to the popular media's process of constructing images that come to represent this case.



In another of his staged events, Mark Byers burns mock grave sites of the accused at the site of the murders.

(Equal Justice Center, 2002). These statistics and the issues raised by the *Paradise Lost* films point to a spreading corrosion in our democracy that is predicated on equal treatment under the law.

The disparities posed by a patchwork indigent defense system are especially troubling when raised to the level of capital murder cases. The Innocence Project (www.innocenceproject.org) works to overturn wrongful convictions and cites the exoneration of 110 death row inmates between 1992 and 2002 (Scheck & Neufeld 2002). This is a staggering statistic that reveals the holes in our class-based justice system. In addition, police and prosecutorial misconduct are two of the leading causes of wrongful conviction (www.innocenceproject.org) and two of the most visible elements in the *Paradise Lost* films. In the case of the West Memphis 3, it is not phantasms or specters of Satan that terrorize rural Arkansas, rather the aggressive incompetence of small town justice, starved of the resources that would bring reason and expertise to the underprivileged. Director Joe Berlinger noted this abuse after making the first film.

"The problem with many indigent death penalty cases is that when you cannot afford a dream team, when you're poor, in a lot of southern states there is no active public defender; it is the court's discretion to assign a regular duty attorney. And they picked lawyers who were not up to the challenge, and that happens a lot. In death penalty cases where the prosecution wants to win, they pick out lawyers who don't have the requisite experience... None of these guys were ready for this" (Yabroff, 1996).

As a filmmaker watching this trial, Berlinger could see the monster of justice at work, feeding on the poor to serve the needs of career and a community in search of resolution.

Conclusion

Damien Echols, Jason Baldwin and Jessie Misskelly have all been in jail now for almost seven years. As of July 2003, their appeals are slowing, working their way through the justice system. Christopher Byers, Michael Moore and Stevie Branch are still dead, the images of their mutilated bodies kept alive and replayed through



It looks like Byers is standing in a ring of fire, his face aglow from the blaze, creating a satanic connotation. Like the star on the forehead, these images let the documentary present a complicated image of Byers and reinforce suspicion around his involvement in the murders.



Mark Byers hires an independent tester to administer a lie detector test to try to clear up any ongoing suspicion of his connection to the murders.

the *Paradise Lost* films. This story is not over and the WM3 support group continues to raise money and awareness about this case. At the moment, there are no clear answers as to what happened on the night of May 5th, 1993. But the two *Paradise Lost* films have shed light on what has happened to the people caught up in the heinous crimes that took place that night.

The video tape box cover to *Paradise Lost* features the teaser,

“Witchcraft or witchhunt? In some places, dressing in black can get you arrested, just ask Damien...”

This lure for attention invokes the curiosity of horror, the voyeuristic fascination of seeing someone else caught in the jaws of a justice system gone wrong, cornered by a modern day torch bearing mob out to cleanse the town of “evil.” In late 20th century United States, that mob has been condensed to a few state employees, a prosecutor’s office, a judge and popular opinion that is often driven by a media that is quick to convict and imbricated in the circulation of monstrous discourses. Yet this mob operates within a broader system that allows marginalized populations to be (mis)represented by public defenders who are under paid and under staffed, while those with power and privilege avoid jail or even courtrooms.

In this case, the private money of HBO came with the strings of access and the double-edged power of representation, creating a hybridized neo-liberal public/private trial where the camera became both a shining light in the molding darkness of small town Arkansas and a paparazzi flash, stealing “authentic” images and casting them into the ravenous maw that is the entertainment industry. Audience action and reaction to the films have prevented this from becoming another forgotten case of (in)justice, preventing Damien and the others from falling victim to a tradition of 15 minutes of fame. As Ingebreetsen (2001) reminds us, “Monsters must be analyzed, fretted about, interpreted” (3).

In this case, the monster that is our judicial system demands our attention, calls for a broader discussion of the limits of a system that is not blind to economics but rather is slave to capital, always already subjugated to an obscured class system that dispenses “get out of jail free” cards with annual dividend checks. And if you don’t happen to have one of these cards and find



Hearing that he passed the test, Byers declares, "I knew I was innocent." The filmmakers note that when he took the test, Byers was on a long list of prescription medications.

yourself on the wrong side of the bars, you better look like a good Christian dressed in white because in George Bush and John Ashcroft's United States, wearing black is only one of many signs that you are not with them, but against them. In post 9/11 United States, the horrors of a satanic panic have merged with the geopolitical fears of terrorism yielding a new breed of stereotyping, judicial excess and monstrous treatment of the vulnerable. Welcome to the new American Gothic. The horror show is us.

[References:](#)



Byers removes his dentures during an argument with WM3 supporters to prove that his teeth prints cannot match the bite marks found on his stepson, Christopher's body. However, after the first trial, he had all his teeth removed and dentures made and could never give a consistent rationale for this dental procedure.

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WM3 supporters show the local media the collection of postcards received from around the world. They present the postcards to the judge as a sort of petition asking for a new trial and a new trial judge.

JUMP CUT

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Death and contradiction: Errol Morris' tragic view of technokillers

by Laurie Calhoun



Fred



Bob



Young Fred goes to work
with his father.

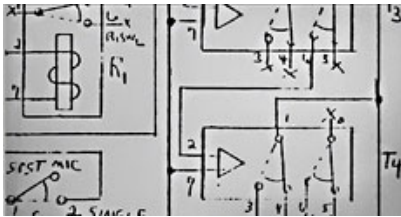
Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr. (1999) and *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003), both directed by Errol Morris, treat the life stories and career trajectories of two men who, though not themselves killers, came to be involved in institutions of killing, conventions and practices devised by human beings expressly in order to effect the deaths of other human beings. Although the stories of Fred Leuchter, an autodidact execution machine expert, and Robert McNamara, the U.S. Secretary of Defense from 1960-1967, are in some ways unique, Director Errol Morris' portrayal of these men reflects a general philosophical view of the human condition and the predicaments to which human fallibility often leads.

What became Leuchter's and McNamara's involvement in state killing was initially a matter of historical chance. Leuchter's father took his son to work, as many fathers do, but "work" in his case was a prison, where Leuchter interacted with inmates and visited death row. McNamara served for three years in the U.S. Army, analyzing the efficiency of bombing raids during World War II, and he later came into public view as a result of his success at the Ford Motor Company. Five weeks after having been named the president of that company, McNamara was approached by representatives of the incoming Kennedy administration and offered a cabinet position.

Critics of capital punishment and the use of military force as a means of conflict resolution would no doubt claim that, beyond their instrumental role in the deaths of individual human beings, these men both helped to



Success at Ford lands
McNamara in the Kennedy
Cabinet.



Death circuits



Military efficiency



McNamara's appeal

perpetuate state killing, by designing, developing and/or implementing the means to do so. In Leuchter's case, his willingness to develop what he characterized as "humane" ways by which to kill convicted capital criminals may have had as its most immediate consequence to quell dissent against the practice, which has been outlawed in every Western nation except the United States. Similarly, McNamara's part in what devolved into the Vietnam debacle contributed at the same time to the amoeba-like expansion of the military-industrial complex, which continues to grow and engulf people and companies long after the end of the Cold War. McNamara and Leuchter naturally view their life's work in an entirely different light.

McNamara: "I just felt that I was serving at the request of the President, who had been elected by the American people. And it was my responsibility to try to help him to carry out the office as he believed was in the interest of our people."

Leuchter: "I became involved in the manufacture of execution equipment because I was concerned with the deplorable condition of the hardware that's in most of the state's prisons, which generally results in torture prior to death."

Somewhat ironically, Leuchter's claim to fame was not his invention of ever better ways to extinguish human beings, but his involvement with the disreputable Holocaust revisionist movement, without which it is probably safe to say that he would never have been made the subject of any film. However, what eventually became Leuchter's role in denying the reality of the Holocaust, through his publication of *The Leuchter Report: The End of a Myth* (1988), was a direct consequence of the peculiar line of work in which he had found himself, the business of execution.

Holocaust revisionist Ernst Zündel was on trial in Canada on charges that he had published statements which he knew to be false and which could cause racial intolerance. In his quest to defend himself, Zündel sought out an expert who might be able to prove that prisoners were never gassed to death at Auschwitz. Because gas chambers continue to be used only in one first-world nation, Zündel's idea at the time was as



Fred's appeal

follows:

"We can solve the mystery of the gas chambers in Auschwitz and all these other places if we find an American expert, because America is the only country that dispatches people with gas. You can't open up the telephone book and say 'gas', and then 'chamber', and then 'experts', and out come ten Fred Leuchters. No. There's nobody. Fred Leuchter was our only hope."



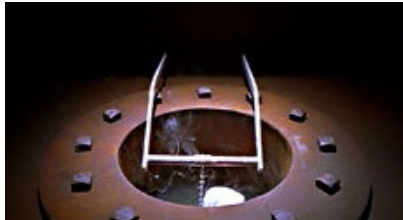
Ernst Zündel, Holocaust revisionist

Robert McNamara's appointment as Secretary of Defense was in some ways fortuitous. First he was offered the position of Secretary of the Treasury, for which he claimed to be ill-qualified. Having declined that position, McNamara was then asked to be the Secretary of Defense, for which he also claimed to be ill-qualified. In the end, however, basking in the flattering glory of the moment, McNamara accepted the job, having been reassured by John F. Kennedy,

"Look Bob, I don't think there's any school for Presidents either."

McNamara's childlike glee in accepting the appointment is evident not only in the archived footage, but even in McNamara's recalling, at age 85, Kennedy's announcement to the press:

"That's how Marg [McNamara's wife] learned I had accepted. It was on television, live!"



Gas chamber

But it was snowing the night when McNamara met with Kennedy, a detail which Morris highlights through including footage of large, heavy snow flakes dropping irrevocably to the ground—what in retrospect reads as a dismal premonition of McNamara's imminent Fall.

Waging war for peace

The nature of the human intellect and the complexity of the world conspire to ensure that self-inflicted catastrophe is always just around the bend, for, as McNamara himself observes, "We all make mistakes." In the case of state killing, this entails that some people's lives are sacrificed for the false beliefs of others, an idea also articulated by McNamara in discussing his interpretation of the metaphor "the fog of war":



Star-struck, McNamara accepting the post of Secretary of Defense.



The nature of things to come is prefigured by snow the night McNamara met with Kennedy.

"What 'the fog of war' means is: war is so complex it's beyond the ability of the human mind to comprehend all the variables. Our judgment, our understanding are not adequate. And we kill people unnecessarily."

Although in his later life McNamara has warned of the dangers of nuclear arms, he continues to speak for the most part from within the broader and widely accepted perspective according to which the use of military means of dispute resolution is itself obviously reasonable:



The fog of war

"Any military commander who is honest with himself, or with those he's speaking to, will admit that he has made mistakes in the application of military power. He's killed people unnecessarily—his own troops or other troops—through mistakes, through errors of judgment. A hundred, or thousands, or tens of thousands, maybe even a hundred thousand. But he hasn't destroyed nations."

And the conventional wisdom is: don't make the same mistake twice, learn from your mistakes. And we all do. Maybe we make the same mistake three times, but hopefully not four or five."



Any military commander will make mistakes.

The "mistakes" about which McNamara warns do not relate to *the very idea* of wielding military force in circumstances of international conflict. As Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, like all members of the establishment before and after him, simply accepted that the proper course of action in resolving international disputes was to deploy deadly weapons, though this invariably meant that some people would be killed in error. In defending the comportment of Curtis LeMay, under whose command 67 Japanese cities were extensively firebombed, and then, on August 6 and August 9, 1945, atomic bombs dropped upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki, McNamara explains that LeMay was ultimately concerned to save the country:

"I remember reading that General Sherman in the Civil War said that the mayor of



Curtis LeMay

Atlanta pleaded with him to save the city. And Sherman essentially said to the mayor just before he torched it and burned it down: 'War is cruel. War is cruelty.' That was the way LeMay felt. He was trying to save the country. He was trying to save our nation. And in the process, he was prepared to do whatever killing was necessary."



Tokyo burning

In order to *save nations*, commanders such as LeMay and managers such as McNamara are willing to annihilate the inhabitants of nations, as though the importance of a nation might somehow transcend the sum total of all of the people who live there. The idea that the state is qualified to decide in the manner of a surrogate God who may live and who should die is quite peculiar, given the nature of institutions in general. A nation is, in the end, no more and no less than a group of people who happen to be ethnically and/or geographically related to one another and who have therefore devised a set of practical rules and conventions by which to facilitate their cohabitation.



The hot cold war

The supreme importance of the state is built into the notion of patriotism, which with the Cold War became even more widely embraced as U.S. leaders and policymakers came to regard themselves as defending the intrinsic values of goodness, freedom and democracy against the Soviet Union, thought to epitomize evil, oppression and tyranny. It was during that time, with the massive development of enormously powerful nuclear warheads, that the strategy of mutually assured destruction (MAD) arose out of the state-centered security model. This program of nuclear deterrence by nuclear proliferation led to an exponential increase in military spending for weapons so destructive that they threatened the very continuation of the species, all in the name of "defense." But when the state reaches the point where it serves not to protect but to threaten the very people by whom it was erected, then it has undermined its very *raison d'être*.

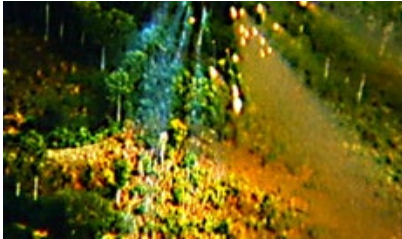


MAD: mutually assured destruction

Nonetheless, the waging of war in the name of peace is an oft-recited litany in a long history of bloody battles between groups of people all of whom invariably claim to be combating evil in order to permit peace to prevail. That the state may destroy its own people is a



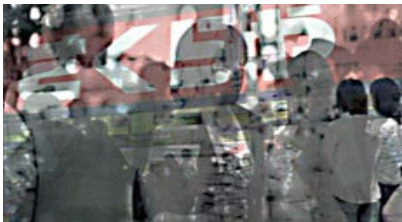
Draftees prepare for the worst.



Rolling thunder: two to three times more bombs dropped in Vietnam than fell on Western Europe in WW2



Bob explains why: to win Vietnamese hearts and minds requires their physical security.



contradiction widely embraced, for many do support sending soldiers abroad in order to fight wars on behalf of the nation of which they themselves are a part. In capitalist societies with voluntary armies such as the United States, this sacrifice of one portion of the population for the rest is essentially classist, for the bulk of troops come from the lower economic strata and have chosen to enlist primarily as a means of securing a living wage.^[1] There is perhaps no more perverse irony than the sacrifice of these particular soldiers, for they enlisted not in order to commit suicide, but in order to enhance the prospects of their own life.

Millions more civilians than soldiers died in Vietnam as a result of the military machine set in motion during McNamara's tenure as Secretary of Defense, including not only the forced enlistment of hundreds of thousands of young men, but also Operation Rolling Thunder, which, McNamara explains,

"Over the years became a very, very heavy bombing program. Two to three times as many bombs as were dropped on Western Europe during all of World War II."

At the time, McNamara justified to the public the policies he implemented by saying that such military action was needed in order to win the allegiance of the South Vietnamese:

"This is not primarily a military problem. It is a battle for the hearts and the minds of the people of South Vietnam. That's our objective. As a prerequisite to that, we must be able to guarantee their physical security."

Director Morris conveys what to military strategists is the shadowy existence of foreign civilians by including time lapse footage that blurs their identity, imparting to them the appearance not of complete people, with friends and families, plans and projects, histories and prospects, but of fleeting images that disappear without the strategists' ever having to acknowledge their own role in the victims' demise. From the perspective of military managers such as McNamara, the far away victims of bombing campaigns are never fully real.

In order to illuminate the mechanics of non-natural death from the perspective of those who orchestrate war, Morris also includes many shots of bombs and

Time lapse footage indicates the shadowy existence of foreign people for our leaders: here, the quasi-reality of the Japanese and ...



... the quasi-existence of the Vietnamese.

missiles from aesthetic and functional perspectives, abstracted from the bloody context and consequences of their use. In the single twenty-second segment depicting civilian death and suffering, Morris provides a rapid-fire suite of ever-accelerating images thus illustrating how the number of victims in Vietnam increased exponentially as a function of military force applied over time. This use of a series of images of victims, each successive shot of which lasts a shorter period of time than the previous, also reflects the ephemeral reality of these people from the perspective of those who assuage their own conscience by quickly and quietly filing them away in their minds as the “collateral damage” of a “just war.”

[Continued: Killing killers for having killed](#)

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The ephemeral reality of the victims in the minds of wartime leaders makes people ...



... maimed and killed just filed away mentally as “collateral damage.”

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Killing killers for having killed



Theater of command

The institution of state execution, which kills killers for having killed on the grounds that killing human beings is morally wrong, embodies similar contradictions to those involved in the waging of war for peace.

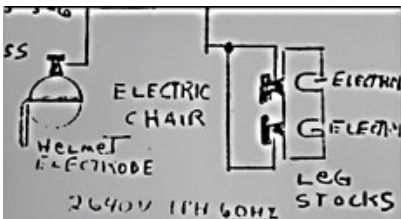
Proponents of capital punishment draw a moral distinction between the victims of capital criminals and the people executed upon conviction of murder by the state, but even if one distinguishes the former from the latter, certain nagging problems persist.

Whether or not “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” is a sound principle of retributive justice, the insurmountable problem with state execution is that it is carried out by fallible human beings, from start to finish. The ACLU has estimated that one out of every twenty-seven people on death row is actually innocent of the crime for which he has been sentenced to death. While such statistics can only be speculative, it is indisputable that some executed convicts have been posthumously exonerated, and the possibilities for error in criminal trials are rife: from the collection of evidence by fallible detectives, to the analysis of evidence by fallible technicians, to the sometimes inadequate defense provided to destitute suspects (particularly by the overworked and underpaid district attorneys who tend to defend them), to the unavoidably biased interpretation of the facts presented in court to fallible jurors and, finally, by the fallible judge who presides over the case.

Furthermore, because the jury selection process excludes from the outset those citizens opposed, on principle, to the death penalty, trial jurors in capital cases have a greater tendency to impose the death penalty than would an average citizen selected randomly from the general population. To make matters worse, because a disproportionately high percentage of convicted murderers on death row are black, there are grounds for believing that, as things stand, the imposition of capital punishment is itself racially slanted. Alternatively, the practice may simply



Theater of execution



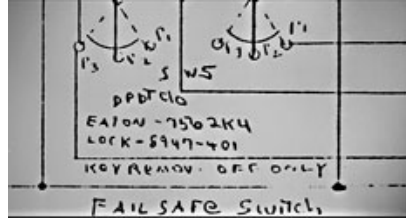
Does the system work?



Assessor Fred

be classist, for a disproportionately high percentage of black men are also poor.

These sorts of subtleties elude Fred Leuchter, and probably anyone else involved in the practice of state execution, for they simply assume that the people whose deaths they are helping to effect deserve to die. Leuchter regards the justice of capital punishment as a given, and the manner in which to carry it out as a straightforward problem of engineering. The essential contradiction inherent in the idea of human beings devising the means by which to annihilate human beings is nowhere better illuminated than in Leuchter's own comparison of execution to life support systems:



Fail safe

"There is no difference in a life support system and an execution system. The system has to function flawlessly for the time period that it is operating. With a life support system, if it doesn't function, the person dies. With an execution system, if it doesn't function flawlessly, the person lives."



Aesthetics of War I

Throughout both *Mr. Death* and *The Fog of War*, Morris highlights the tactile thingness of the machines of death, a reminder that only sentient beings can appreciate the sensory qualities of this equipment, expressly designed in order to destroy the very capacity of people to perceive.

The role of functionaries in death industries

In some ways, McNamara and Leuchter bear striking resemblances to Adolf Eichmann, at least as portrayed by Hannah Arendt:



Aesthetics of War II

"The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal."[\[2\]](#)

During the height of his professional career, each of these men's attitudes toward the taking of human life



Righteous Bob



Righteous Fred



Historical perspective



Functionary Fred

was the same, and each took himself to be acting in a principled way. Just as McNamara and Leuchter conceptualized in moral terms their professional involvement in destroying human beings, Adolf Eichmann claimed to be a rule-governed, law-abiding citizen, a person so principled and disciplined that he even acted in accordance with Kant's categorical imperative. Eichmann, like so many others throughout history involved in mass murder, was a functionary, and his leader, like most throughout history, did not ask anyone to *murder* other people. Rather, Hitler justified his war by appeal to the usual moral rhetoric, most notably in terms of self-defense:

"Today it is not princes and princes' mistresses who haggle and bargain over state borders; it is the inexorable Jew who struggles for his domination over the nations. No nation can remove this hand from its throat except by the sword. Only the assembled and concentrated might of a national passion rearing up in its strength can defy the international enslavement of peoples. Such a process is and remains a bloody one."^[3]

The Germans involved with the death industries of the Third Reich did not ask whether they should be killing for the state. Rather, they focused their energies on how to go about doing it.^[4]

McNamara and Leuchter, too, acted as exemplary functionaries, directing their energies and intellect to the development of methods by which to destroy human beings in the name of "justice." This is not, however, to suggest that Leuchter and McNamara were somehow exceptional in this respect. People often claim that they would have fled or helped the resistance, or acted in some other way so as to thwart the evil Nazis, but the tragic truth is that most people would have done precisely what most of the Germans did, viz., accept as true the proclamations of their government, a government which was in fact put in place by the people themselves. One of the most disturbing aspects of the Holocaust is the fact that the people who accepted "the received view" at the time were complicit in their government's slaughter of millions of innocent people.

In *Mr. Death*, historian Van Pelt reminds us that the



Functionary Bob



Historian Van Pelt sees how euphemism and coded language make savagery socially permissible.



"I analyzed bombing operations and how to make them more efficient."



Nazis were themselves the first to deny the reality of the Holocaust, for they used a coded language, according to which chemical extermination was “special treatment.” The use of this coded language is no doubt one of the reasons why the Third Reich succeeded to the extent to which and for so long as it did. Similarly, when, today, people support their leaders’ decisions to go to war, they do so under the interpretation which has been offered to them by the executors of the war themselves, in an idiom that codes civilian slaughter as “collateral damage.” McNamara himself recasts the notion of military “efficiency” as follows:

“I analyzed bombing operations, and how to make them more efficient—Not more efficient in the sense of killing more, but more efficient in weakening the adversary.”

While Leuchter and McNamara simply accepted that state killing is a perfectly respectable enterprise, they are far from unique in this regard. Throughout history, human beings have found ways to interpret their own acts of killing as at least permissible (in self-defense), if not obligatory (to combat evil). Indeed, some of the most savage battles and practices throughout human history have been and continue to be carried out by self-proclaimed Christians, who interpret “Thou shalt not kill” to mean “Thou shalt not murder,” and maintain that their own acts of killing, even of indisputably innocent people, are never unjust.[5]

[Continued: Leuchter and McNamara's tragic flaws](#)

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Thou shalt not kill.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The Tragic Flaws of Fred A. Leuchter and Robert S. McNamara

In spite of their blindspots with regard to capital punishment and war, Leuchter and McNamara did recognize, on some level, the irrelevance of their past experience to the tasks with which they were charged by people who wanted to believe in their expertise. Leuchter explains how his detailed knowledge of the electric chair led him to be hired by another state to design a lethal injection machine, and from there eventually to producing a gas chamber:



A hanging problem with old gallows and Leuchter's knowledge about the electric chair led to him to be hired to produce first a lethal injection machine, then a gas chamber.

“Essentially the states talk with each other. We immediately got Illinois and we got Delaware. They had a hanging problem that they totally were not able to deal with. They had a gallows that had been stored for 25 or 30 years. They took it out and they screwed it together and it fell over. The only thing that was left that was functional were the hinges for the trap door. The reasoning here is that I built helmets for electric chairs, so now I could build lethal injection machines. I now build lethal injection machines, so I'm now competent to build a gallows. And since I'm building gallows, I'm also competent to work on gas chambers because I've done all of the other three.”

But at this point the degree to which Leuchter has come to believe in his own expertise emerges:

“And what really makes you competent is the fact that you have the necessary background, you do the investigation, you find out what the problem is and you solve it. It's not anything different than any competent engineer could do. The difference is that it's not a major market. A lot of people are not interested and are

morally opposed to working on execution equipment. They think it's going to change them."



McNamara's return in 1995 to Vietnam and dinner with Foreign Minister, Xuan Thuy. "We almost came to blows."

Those who refuse to work in the death industries on the grounds that doing so will change them are right, for *everything* we do changes us. Precisely and only because he became an expert on execution, Fred Leuchter was enlisted to aid the Holocaust revisionist movement. Leuchter himself never killed anyone using the machines of his own device, and he came to be reviled not for his profession, but for his public denial that millions of people had been annihilated by the Third Reich.

McNamara relays the most telling part of his 1995 exchange with the former Foreign Minister of Vietnam, Xuan Thuy, who decades after the end of the Vietnam war sternly admonished the former Secretary for his ignorance as follows:

"Mr. McNamara, you must never have read a history book. If you'd had [sic], you'd know we weren't pawns of the Chinese or the Russians. McNamara, didn't you know that? Don't you understand that we have been fighting the Chinese for 1000 years? We were fighting for our independence. And we would fight to the last man. And we were determined to do so. And no amount of bombing, no amount of U.S. pressure would ever have stopped us."



The chemist unwittingly

Similarly, it was Leuchter's utter ignorance of the science of chemistry which prevented him from recognizing the ridiculousness of his supposed proof of the non-existence of gas chambers at Auschwitz, as the chemist who performed the "definitive" analyses

made an accomplice to
Holocaust revisionism.



Cyanide aesthetics

explains:

“He presented us with rock samples anywhere from the size of your thumb up to half the size of your fist. We broke them up with a hammer so that we could get a sub-sample... You have to look at what happens to cyanide when it reacts with a wall. Where does it go? How far does it go? Cyanide is a surface reactant. It's probably not going to penetrate more than 10 microns. Human hair is 100 microns in diameter. Crush this sample up, I have just diluted that sample 10,000; 100,000 times. If you're going to look for it, you're going to look on the surface only. There's no reason to go deep, because it's not going to be there. Which was the exposed surface? I didn't even have any idea. That's like analyzing paint on a wall by analyzing the timber that's behind it.”

While proud of their accomplishments, Leuchter and McNamara became inextricably entangled in a web of catastrophe owing to their in some ways humble belief that it was their place to do their job, without challenging the premises upon which the practice in question was based. And, although both men clearly derived pleasure from the power they possessed in virtue of the alleged expertise conferred upon them by others, in their better moments they recognize the role that chance played in the narratives that their lives became. This element of chance serves as a source of solace to both men, and Director Morris renders Leuchter and McNamara virtually impossible to hate, in spite of their glaring flaws, through his portrayal of their intermittent humility. As horrible as state execution, the Vietnam War, and Holocaust revisionism may be, Morris' depictions of men intimately involved with these enterprises are finally sympathetic. Rather than denouncing these men as their critics do, the director offers us the opportunity to think about what it would be like to be in these unfortunate people's shoes. Morris portraits are of tragic heroes, whose frailties are human-all-too-human, not heinous. These pictures thus illuminate the perils and pitfalls of human fallibility in a much more general way.

Both Leuchter and McNamara came to believe that *because* they had been hired to do a job, this, in and of



Troglodytic Fred
investigates Auschwitz.



Why should McNamara's work at Ford on seatbelts and the problem of human "breakage" make him competent to deal with international conflict?

itself, showed that they were qualified to do it. But why should a man who knows how to kill people using technology know anything whatsoever about historical research? Why should a man who has helped design cars and seatbelts while working on the problem of human "breakage" at the Ford Motor Company be competent to deal with international conflict? Through the misapplication of tools to problems for which they are not suited, human beings often find themselves in a "rabbit hole," as Morris characterized Vietnam during his acceptance speech for the Oscar for Best Documentary Feature, awarded to *The Fog of War* on February 29, 2004:

"Forty years ago this country went down a rabbit hole in Vietnam and millions died. I fear we're going down a rabbit hole once again..."



The U.S. domino theory of communist takeover was a simplistic view of how people in other countries viewed their own history and options.

Illustrating a metaphor used by President Johnson, Morris' domino images suggest that one event leads to another. But the domino theory of communist takeover of small states, feared intensely by U.S. policymakers during the time of McNamara's tenure as Secretary of Defense, was erroneously applied to Vietnam. Having already suffered under French colonial rule, the Vietnamese vehemently resisted the United States, which they quite understandably took to be yet another colonial power. Although the domino theory holds considerable appeal, in fact, as the case of Vietnam amply illustrates, it is impossible to predict the ultimate outcome of even one's most deliberative actions, for it is impossible to predict their effects upon other people, all of whom are operating in accordance with their own beliefs.

So, for example, James Roth, the chemist who provided the analyses used to support Holocaust denial as presented in *The Leuchter Report* (which has been widely translated and distributed all over the world), produced a context-free analysis of the chemical constituents of the samples which he had been presented by Leuchter. That analysis was then appropriated by revisionists to defend a thesis fallaciously.

When Leuchter speaks in his capacity as a death expert, explaining why an electrocution must use 2000 volts or why a lethal injection machine must administer sequential doses in order to achieve the subject's death, his words sound shallow and sophistic. While capable of parroting intelligent turns of phrase, Leuchter has somehow completely failed to grasp what the intentional annihilation of human beings really means:

“We must always remember, and we must never forget, the fact that the person being executed is a human being.

Similarly, McNamara cites many facts about his past regarding superficial measures of success such as his election to Phi Beta Kappa, his appointment as an assistant professor at Harvard Business School, or even that in grade school he was smarter than his classmates, all in a diaphanous effort to convince his audience of his superior intellect. But in describing the Cuban missile crisis, McNamara explains the choice which he and Kennedy faced as follows:

“On that critical Saturday, October 27 th [1962], we had two Khrushchev messages in front of us. One had come in Friday night, and it had been dictated by a man who was either drunk or under tremendous stress. Basically, he said, ‘If you'll guarantee you won't invade Cuba, we'll take the missiles out.’ Then, before we could respond, we had a second message that had been dictated by a bunch of hardliners. And it said, in effect, ‘If you attack, we're prepared to confront you with masses of military power.’ So, what to do? We had, I'll call it, the soft message and the hard message.”

By including McNamara's own description of the dilemma, Morris displays how the former Secretary's reaction reflected his own presuppositions and the militaristic framework underlying his understanding of what are appropriate responses to conflict. In recalling this period, “the dates when we literally looked down the gun barrel into nuclear war,” McNamara does not even mention the April 16, 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion as a relevant factor in the Soviets' stance. Instead, it takes



At the time of the missile crisis, some of Kennedy's entourage did not know the U.S. had tried to assassinate Castro...



... and seemingly forgot the Bay of Pigs as motivating Russia and Cuba then.

Morris to remind McNamara of that offensive action, leading the Secretary to provide a much more elaborate explanation of what happened, and finally illuminating the rational grounds for what otherwise might have seemed to be a gratuitous provocation on the part of the Soviets:

Morris: “Also, we had attempted to invade Cuba.”

McNamara: “Well, with the Bay of Pigs. That undoubtedly influenced their thinking, I think that’s correct. But, more importantly, from a Cuban and a Russian point of view, they knew what in a sense I really didn’t know: we had attempted to assassinate Castro under Eisenhower and under Kennedy...and later under Johnson.”

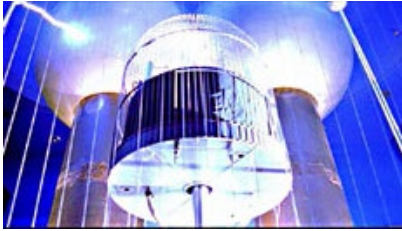
Someone within the administration presumably knew about the U.S. attempts to assassinate Castro, but, without this information, McNamara’s context-free analysis of the Cuban Missile crisis seems just as foolish as Leuchter’s “proof” that cyanide was never used at Auschwitz.

[Continued: The logic of error](#)

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The logic of error



Pyrotechnics set the tone at the beginning of *Mr. Death*.



Another innocent victim: Thomas Edison's experiment electrocuting an elephant at Coney Island.



Human breakage - McNamara studied this problem at Ford by dropping human skulls down a stairway.

Given the pyrotechnic opening of *Mr. Death*, and its inclusion of a segment featuring the electrocution of an elephant (an experiment performed by Thomas Edison), Errol Morris' fascination with technokiller Fred Leuchter might strike one as morbid or even perverse. Similarly, in *The Fog of War*, Morris includes a significant segment of skulls crashing on impact after having been dropped down a stairwell, which was, in fact, precisely the manner in which McNamara studied the problem of "human breakage" during his tenure at Ford. These morbid scenes notwithstanding, the director's philosophical interests reach much deeper than death. Morris' portraits of McNamara and Leuchter, men who would never describe themselves as "killers," though many others have, serve to magnify the intractable problem of human fallibility.

When Morris asks McNamara how he was affected by the ever more strident protests against the Vietnam War, the former Secretary replies,

"I don't think my thinking was changing. We were in the Cold War. And this was a Cold War activity."

In this single phrase lies the key to the mystery of why people never seem to be able to learn from other people's mistakes. It is the very nature of mistakes not to be recognized by the people who make them at the time when they make them.

Some people may learn from their own mistakes, as McNamara takes himself to have done, for since his retirement he has invested considerable energy and time in trying to increase awareness of the dangers of nuclear weapons. But people do not generally learn from other people's mistakes. This is not because they do not want to, but, rather, because no two situations are ever exactly the same. In order to recognize the applicability of "the lessons of history" to the present, one would have to accept that the current situation



Protests ignored

were relevantly similar to that of the past. However, when regarded in detail, the rich texture of history is invariably unique. Nothing like the Vietnam War could ever have occurred at any time in history other than when it did, which is precisely why McNamara quite rightly insists that his thinking at the time was largely determined by the dynamics of the Cold War:

“It’s almost impossible for our people today to put themselves back into that period. In my seven years as Secretary, we came within a hair’s breadth of war with the Soviet Union on three different occasions. 24 hours a day, 365 days a year for seven years as Secretary of Defense, I lived the Cold War.”



IBM machine or abacus?
The two men learned a kind of “calculation” from their trades but could not recognize their errors in dealing with much larger problems.

In a similar way, when people defend the actions of U.S. President George W. Bush, who on March 19, 2003 flouted international law and waged offensive war on the grounds that with the events of 9/11 the world forever changed, they effectively deny the relevance of any of the teachings of history for the present day.

McNamara and Leuchter applied the very same powers of deduction and calculation that had led to their professional success to other contexts, which led to their infamy. But they were unable to recognize their errors regarding Vietnam, on the one hand, and the Holocaust on the other, for these problems exceeded their ken. They themselves were incapable of appreciating this fact, for they were operating from within a cognitive context that permitted them to make their mistakes, as McNamara explains:

“We were wrong, but we had in our minds a mindset that led to that action. And it carried such heavy costs. We see incorrectly or we see only half of the story at times.”



The Establishment’s mindset prefigures those selected to be a part of the Establishment.

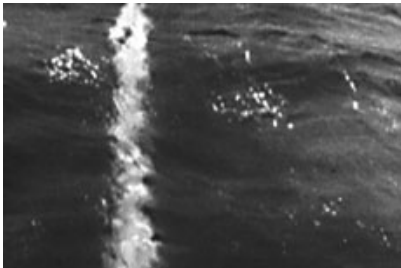
As outsiders or in retrospect (in McNamara’s case) we recognize that these men applied the wrong tools to the problem at hand, rather like someone who tries to remove a screw using a hammer. Is it “vicious” or “evil” to attempt to remove a screw using a hammer? No, it is stupid.

When Fred Leuchter’s lack of certification as an engineer in the state of Massachusetts was claimed to discredit his alleged expertise, Zündel offered this hilarious albeit earnest defense:



“Did Christ have a diploma in Christianity? Did Marx have a diploma in Marxism? Did Adolf Hitler have a diploma in National Socialism? No, they did not. But they knew a hell of a lot about their field.”

We see only half the story at times.



Interpretive mistakes were made, here at Tonkin Gulf.



Zündel and his associates don hardhats to deflect the weight of historical evidence.



Fred's first trip to Europe

The segments of Zündel are consistently and deeply comic, in stark juxtaposition to those featuring Zündel's and Leuchter's morally stern critics, dark and somber judges who condemn the two misguided men for being misguided. Morris' philosophical point here is profound. Zündel and Leuchter hold beliefs that are deeply flawed—it's not that they are evil, but that they are clowns. And, ultimately, they arrived at their eccentric beliefs about the Holocaust in the very manner in which they arrived at their other, socially acceptable, beliefs, through applying their own intellect to the data with which they had been confronted.

When people rail against Holocaust revisionists, one thing that they fail to bear in mind is that, as despicable as Holocaust denial may seem, in fact revisionists are in a tiny minority who raise skeptical questions about “the received view.” It may well be that their skepticism is motivated by subterranean racism and other psychological and emotional forces, but the fact remains: they are going against the grain to raise the questions that they do. In other words, though they are evidently wrong in the conclusions that they have drawn through their idiosyncratic “reexamination” of the facts, they are independent thinkers in a way in which the vast majority of people who supported the Nazis then or unreflectively accept what they have been told by their own government today, are not. Fred Leuchter expresses his consternation at being treated as a criminal for holding a set of beliefs as follows:

“I bear no ill will to any Jews any place, whether they're in the United States or abroad. I bear a great deal of ill will to those people that have come after me, those people who have persecuted and prosecuted me, but that's got nothing to do with them being Jewish. That only has to do with the fact that they've been interfering with my right to live, think, breathe, and earn a living. As far as being a Revisionist, at this point, I'm not an official Revisionist, but I guess I'm a reluctant Revisionist. If my belief that there were no gas chambers at

became a mission but ...



... he failed to take into account an abundance of hard evidence.



Fred, out of work, out of luck: after testifying for Zündel in Canada, Fred's consulting jobs dried up.



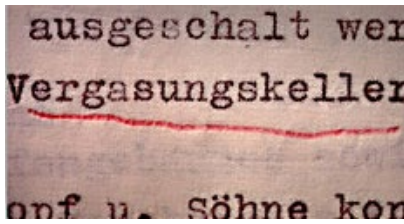
Dim denial: the inside of Auschwitz facilities used to gas to death innocent human beings.

Auschwitz, Birkenau, and Majdanek makes me a Revisionist, then so be it. They've expressed their unquestioned intent of destroying me simply because I testified in Canada, not because I have any other affiliation with any anti-Semitic organization, not because I'm affiliated with any Nazi or Neo-Nazi organization."

Errol Morris recognizes that ignorance is omnipotent *vis-à-vis* the person who suffers from it in the moment: an ignorant person does not know what he does not know. Problems arise when people assume that they do know what they do not know, but where does the moral culpability for a person's ignorance lie? A mistake is, by definition, not something intended by the person who makes it. Ignorance is a type of mistake for which, therefore, the individual cannot reasonably be said to be morally reproachable. When people willfully don blinders, refusing even to entertain information possibly relevant to the question at hand, then some would claim that they are culpably ignorant. But this merely postpones the same concern, leading ultimately to a variation on the initial question: what sort of person would choose to be ignorant? Is a person who freely chooses to be ignorant sufficiently rational to be held responsible for his choice?

In the cases of McNamara, Leuchter and Zündel, these men made mistakes precisely because of their own spiraling ignorance and delusion, which they themselves could not surmount, for they believed what they believed. Whether or not their false beliefs were a matter of wishful thinking, they were nonetheless beliefs.

By placing Zündel under the bright light of shining irony, Morris suggests that this man is yet another victim of himself, a tragic victim of his own limited powers of cognition and pretensions to The Truth. The irony of Holocaust revisionism is that the Holocaust *was* so horrific, that it verges on the surreal and is very nearly incredible. Were incontrovertible historical evidence not preserved at the National Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. (and elsewhere), one could only wonder how such an atrocity could ever have taken place. As the remaining survivors pass away, humanity will become more and more dependent upon historical evidence, but it is probably the case that most people today believe in the reality of the Holocaust on the basis of hearsay.



Deutsch ist wichtig. Fred never examined the documents amassed in archives.



A track less traveled: most people who believe in the reality of the Holocaust have never been to Auschwitz.



Detective Fred on-site looking for what really transpired.



Errol Morris protested the Vietnam War and is obviously not a Holocaust revisionist, but he presents these characters sympathetically, because he recognizes that their vice is an admixture of ignorance and self-delusion to which everyone is prone. Thus his portrayal of the contradictions involved in the historian Robert Jan Van Pelt reveal him not to recognize how he himself embodies some of the very Leuchterian characteristics which he decries:

“Leuchter is a victim of the myth of Sherlock Holmes. A crime has been committed. You go to the site of the crime and with a magnifying glass you find a hair, or you find a speck of dust on the shoe. Leuchter thinks that is the way reality can be reconstructed. But he is no Sherlock Holmes.”

In relaying, without apparent irony, his own investigative process in retracing Leuchter’s steps, van Pelt explains,

“I have a job to do and my job, my first job, is to try to understand where this guy [Leuchter] was at what time. To take that tape and to record every camera angle, where it was, what piece of wall they were looking at, where he took the samples. It was important to be able to follow that trail very, very precisely. I wanted to see how he had done it.”

Echoing Leuchter’s own discovery of his “mission” to serve the truth, Van Pelt later reports about himself,

“The first time I came into the archive I was stunned. I had found a mission, I had found a task, I’d found a vocation. When you go to Birkenau there is very little left and to suddenly have in that room that concentration of evidence. There is a tactile reality, an incredible texture, the texture of making that camp...”

[Continued: Revisionist history](#)

Detective Van Pelt later
tracks Leuchter's trail.



The texture of evidence
makes the Holocaust
tangible to Van Pelt.



The texture of archival
evidence was never
experienced by Fred.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Revisionist history



Commander-in-chief
Lyndon B. Johnson

Perhaps it should be unsurprising that Errol Morris presents Holocaust revisionists as suffering from cognitive, not moral defects, for Morris is himself a revisionist of sorts. With *The Fog of War*, the director calls into question the widely embraced view that Robert McNamara was a hawk who somehow talked Lyndon Johnson into getting much more deeply involved in Vietnam than he would have been inclined to do, left to his own devices. Some historians have disputed Morris' revisionist picture, but, in his defense, he has pointed out that the most important tapes upon which his interpretation rests were only recently released. Defenders of Johnson retort that a judicious selection of tapes could be used to support any interpretation, no matter how at odds it may be with the rest of historical documentation, including all of the books already written about that period.[\[6\]](#)

The text of a film running less than two hours is of necessity ommissive and therefore ultimately reflective of the director's own values and beliefs. But even within Morris' film one finds the following curious exchange:



Revealing reel-to-reel

Johnson: "My answer is 'yes', but my judgment is 'no'."

McNamara: "All right, we'll take care of it, Mr. President."

Johnson: "When are you going to issue the order?"

McNamara: "We'll make it late today so it'll miss some of the morning editions. I'll handle it in a way that will minimize the announcement."

Obviously, taken out of context, we cannot know why Johnson said "My answer is 'yes,' but my judgment is 'no'," but, given the date, this certainly appears to be his response to the question whether ground troops should be deployed. This interpretation would imply that when Johnson said "but my judgment is 'no'," he himself had scruples about the idea, but acquiesced to

whoever had made the proposal, and, given his response, it may well have been McNamara himself.



Empathize with the enemy



Thompson saves the day



Johnson's plea

Indeed, given McNamara's apparent readiness to invade Cuba in the face of the missile crisis ("The first day's attack was planned at 1080 sorties, a huge air attack"), and the fact that Kennedy was finally dissuaded from doing so not by his Secretary of Defense, but by Tommy Thompson, the former Ambassador to Moscow, who knew Khrushchev personally and thus was able to "empathize with the enemy," there does not seem to be an abundance of support in *The Fog of War* for a revisionist reading. It is obviously crucial to McNamara that his audience believe that he was hired by Kennedy and fired by Johnson, but whether the latter was because McNamara had provoked or restrained Johnson in Vietnam remains an open question.

In any case, one suspects that had Morris produced such a biographical documentary of Lyndon Johnson (were he alive today), it would have been every bit as sympathetic to Johnson's own plight. The pictures and words of Johnson presented in *The Fog of War* are those of a man basically as confused as Fred Leuchter, Ernst Zündel and Robert McNamara. When Johnson histrionically justifies his massively destructive military policies by claiming that he is combating tyranny and aggression, one can only regret his failure to recognize the contradiction in which he has become embroiled:

"Well, we're off to bombing these people.
We're over that hurdle."

The segment showing Johnson assuming the Presidency can hardly inspire anything but pity for the man, who deeply regretted Kennedy's untimely death and certainly never asked to inherit the problem of Vietnam:

"I will do my best. That is all I can do. I ask
for your help. And for God's."



Johnson takes over

With *The Fog of War*, Morris has offered one perspective on Robert S. McNamara and his role in Vietnam. But Morris is not (nor is it plausible that he would claim to be) immune from his own critique of the notion of human expertise. What, in the end, makes a man a historian, beyond his desire to know more about history? What qualifies a documentary filmmaker to produce a film that finally tells “the truth” about his subject matter?

Extra-epistemological considerations

Leuchter’s mere belief in the non-existence of gas chambers at Auschwitz finally developed into a veritable article of faith, as Morris brings out by asking, “Have you ever thought that you might be wrong, or do you think that you could make a mistake?” Leuchter responds:

“No, I’m past that. When I attempted to turn those facilities into gas execution facilities and was unable to, I made a decision at that point that I wasn’t wrong. And perhaps that’s why I did it. At least it cleared my mind, so I know that I left no stone unturned. I did everything possible to substantiate and prove the existence of the gas chambers, and I was unable to.”

Leuchter’s “will to believe” is admired by Ernst Zündel, who recalls,

“When my doubt about the Holocaust first came to me, it took me two and a half years, and I was like a reforming alcoholic. I was like one yo-yo, back and forth: believe, not believe, maybe believe, false belief, true belief. Fred was able to purge his own mind within a matter of a week. That’s amazing to me. So I said: ‘Fred, what convinced you?’ He said: ‘Ernst, it wasn’t what I found, it was what I didn’t find.’ That blew me away. It never, ever occurred to me that a man could be convinced by something that is not there. That’s what Fred said.”

Like atheism, Holocaust denial is based upon the alleged proof of non-existence supposedly achieved through not finding any evidence. This hubristic error



Fred in the dark



Zündel thinks

of reasoning supposes that, because something lies outside of one's own limited range of experience, it does not and cannot exist.

It seems clear that Leuchter and Zündel advocate Holocaust denial largely because of extra-epistemological considerations, one factor of which is no doubt the value they derive through being “celebrities” of a sort, albeit notorious ones to all Holocaust survivor groups. Both men paint their mission as having to do with the right to freedom of speech, but it is clear that this is simply an add-on which delusively confers upon their activities a veneer of moral righteousness. At bottom, each of these men is most strongly driven by psychological factors that transcend the evidential context which they claim to support revisionism, as Van Pelt explains, “Holocaust denial is a story about vanity. It is a way to get in the limelight, to be noticed—to be someone—maybe to be loved.”

Yet through his depiction of the outraged and morally righteous critics of Zündel and Leuchter, Morris simultaneously signals the ugliness of the critics' own vanity. There certainly seems to be a widespread misconception among people throughout history that simply by denouncing others as “evil” one elevates oneself to the exalted category of “good.” The often seething self-righteousness of such judges does not become less ugly for the fact that they appear to hold true beliefs.

Errol Morris is keenly aware of the degree to which *we find ourselves with our beliefs*, and these beliefs sometimes rest upon flimsy evidence. Sometimes the only real “reason” that we believe something is that we happen to believe it (we no longer even know why), and our cognitive manner of dealing with the world into which we have been in some sense thrown is essentially conservative.^[7] Traditions such as the institution of slavery, the legal possession of women by men, capital punishment, and the use of military means of conflict resolution are extraordinarily difficult to dismantle precisely because people tend to believe what they have



Celebrity Fred revels in his friendly reception by Holocaust revisionist groups.

been told by their parents and authorities, who themselves have come to their beliefs through the testimony of other merely fallible human beings. While Holocaust revisionists are in all likelihood emotionally and psychologically motivated to deny the reality of the Holocaust, they are far from unique in this regard. The chemist who analyzed the Auschwitz samples for Leuchter describes a far more general tendency when he observes,



“If they go in with blinders on, they will see what they want to see. What was he really trying to do? What was he trying to prove?”

In reality, neither Holocaust revisionists nor their critics seem to have much effect upon the political landscape of today. The former group wishes to deny that the slaughter of millions of innocent people by the Nazis ever transpired; the latter affirms that it happened. But what, in the end, is the import of either stance, when those who possess the power to kill innocent people continue to this day to do so, all the while wielding moral rhetoric along the lines of the perpetrators of The Third Reich?

In relaying the story of the March 10, 1945 firebombing of Tokyo, which incinerated 100,000 human beings, most of them innocent civilians, McNamara concurs with the opinion of the commander in charge, Curtis LeMay, who after the war observed that if they had lost, they would have been tried for war crimes:



“He, and I’d say I, were behaving as war criminals. But what makes it immoral if you

What was he trying to prove?

Japan under attack

lose and not immoral if you win?"

In the moment of action, political leaders invariably conceive of their own mass killings in moral terms. Holocaust affirmation and Holocaust denial do nothing to change this. Ironically, the reality of Hitler has been deployed rhetorically to support every manner of military aggression in recent years. Thus, in 1991 Saddam Hussein was equated with Hitler, and that supposedly made it permissible to destroy thousands of innocent Iraqis. Slobodan Milosevic's alleged similarity to Hitler made his country fair game for massive and indiscriminate bombing in 1999. The existence of Osama bin Laden and his instigation of the crimes of September 11, 2001 supposedly justified the slaughter of thousands of innocent Afghanis during October and November of 2001. And the ghost of Hitler reared its ugly and ironic head once again when proponents of the 2003 invasion of Iraq spoke of weapons of mass destruction, allegedly stockpiled and waiting only to be deployed. But rather than finding and destroying WMDs, the invaders killed thousands of innocent human beings. What is the importance of our historical understanding of the Holocaust, if the populace still, to this day, has not learned that leaders invariably characterize their own mass killings as dictates of justice, as though they themselves were acting under the divine light of The Almighty?

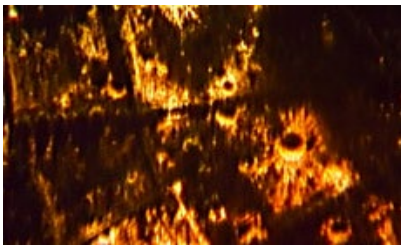
In some segments, McNamara attempts to distance himself from the Cold War "activities" of which he was intimately a part:

"During the Kennedy administration, they designed a 100 megaton bomb. It was tested in the atmosphere. I remember this. Cold War? Hell, it was a hot war!"

Again, regarding the Cuban missile crisis, McNamara remarks that "major voices in the U.S. were calling for invasion." Who, precisely, were these "major voices"? By employing these words, McNamara suggests that he had nothing whatsoever to do with what was happening in the labs and factories that created such weapons, nor in the decision of whether or not to invade Cuba. But McNamara was the person in charge of the entire U.S. Department of Defense. If the Secretary of Defense had nothing to do with the creation and testing of such weapons and the decision of whether to invade other nations, then who, precisely, did?



The problem of interpretation



Efficient bombing continues.



The bomb



Major voices called for the invasion of Cuba and escalation in Vietnam.



Last word Bob continued cheerfully to report progress in Vietnam, even in the face of mounting body bags.

Some historians are disturbed that *The Fog of War* (as does McNamara's Vietnam-era memoir, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (1996)) gives McNamara "the last word". Both *The Fog of War* and *In Retrospect* suggest that in a case such as this, where responsibility for a deplorable event is shared among various parties, the historical truth is a function of the complicitors' longevity. While this is perhaps one way of understanding the adage that "The victors write history," it is clearly at odds with orthodox historical scholarship. It is manifestly a matter of chance that, of all people, Robert S. McNamara should have the final say, but, to reiterate, one cannot help but surmise that most any protagonist would have been handled just as charitably by Director Morris, whose humanity shines through at every interpretive turn.

[Continued: The lessons of history](#)

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The lessons of history

Errol Morris is a tragedian, in the classic sense of the word. His protagonists are tragic heroes with the usual human-all-too-human hamartia, most notably hubris. The virtues and vices of these people are inextricably intertwined, and they fall because they have come to believe in the expertise ascribed to them by other, equally ignorant, people. Because McNamara and Leuchter had succeeded by dint of their own self-reliance, they finally came to believe in themselves to such a degree that they ended up in regrettable and in some ways ridiculous predicaments. Morris' approach to these characters is to attempt to understand their situation from their own perspective, rather than simply accepting the received view and denouncing them outright. Morris is himself something of a detective, setting out like Sherlock Holmes to learn "the true story" about his widely maligned protagonists, who emerge not as evil, but profoundly misguided.

"No one knowingly does evil" are words sometimes ascribed to Socrates, and suggestive of a correlative question as well: what precisely is the moral judgment, the denunciation of these unfortunate people supposed to accomplish? What is the point of condemning Robert McNamara and Fred Leuchter, when it is obvious that no rational person would ever willingly choose to be either one of them? These men stumbled into holes that they themselves had dug, and try though they may to pull themselves out of the mud, it is simply too late. In the epilogue to *The Fog of War*, McNamara refuses to explain why he did not speak out against the Vietnam War after he and President Johnson had parted ways:

"I'm not going to say any more than I have. These are the kinds of questions that get me in trouble... A lot of people misunderstand the war, misunderstand me. A lot of people think I'm a son of a bitch."

McNamara knows that he cannot bring back the lives



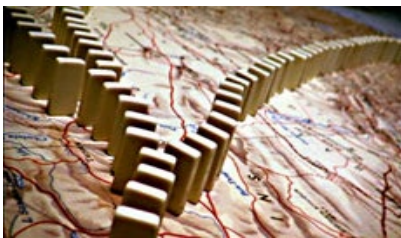
Self-reliance may mean you believe what others say about your expertise.



The "son of a bitch" still won't say why he never denounced the Vietnam war after he and Johnson parted ways.



Book of the named dead: the U.S. government acknowledges only the 58,000 American deaths in Vietnam as people with identities.



In reflecting on counterfactuals, McNamara has become a dove in later life. What effect can that possibly have on today's military and political hawks?

destroyed during his tenure as Secretary of Defense, nor the many others who died after he and Johnson had set in motion a military machine that consumed millions more. He may wish, on some level, that Kennedy had never persuaded him to accept the position of Secretary of Defense, but McNamara, though tempted by glory and fame, was never coerced, and so he must live with the knowledge that he alone bears responsibility for having done what he did.

In a trailer to the DVD release of *The Fog of War*, McNamara offers ten lessons to posterity. These lessons differ significantly from the direct quotes presented by Morris as “lessons” within *The Fog of War*. McNamara’s own lessons are caveats to those who would wage unilateral war, militarize outerspace, and attack preemptively to thwart hypothetical dangers lying in the future. But McNamara has apparently failed to grasp that, to the people who make decisions about such matters, his advice falls on deaf ears, just as did the words of war critics during the period of his own tenure as Secretary of Defense. In other words, McNamara seems never really to have understood the epistemological lesson that Morris’ films convey and the former Secretary himself relays, viz., that human fallibility is insurmountable. Even after having acknowledged in his memoirs that the United States’ involvement in Vietnam was a regrettable mistake, McNamara nonetheless feels qualified to apply his own expertise, this time, he thinks, in virtue of his age:

“Historians don’t really like to deal with counterfactuals, with what might have been. They want to talk about history. ‘And how the hell do you know, McNamara, what might have been? Who knows?’ Well, I know certain things.”

Why should McNamara’s mistakes, which contributed to the needless and premature deaths of millions of human beings, qualify him to be the first war critic in history whose exhortations U.S. leaders might finally heed?

Interestingly enough, in one of McNamara’s many efforts to endear himself to his audience he blithely confesses:

“One of the lessons I learned early on: never say ‘never.’ Never, never, never. Never say ‘never.’ And secondly, never answer the



Public figures answer the questions they wish had been asked of them and evade the tough questions.

question that is asked of you. Answer the question that you wish had been asked of you. And quite frankly, I follow that rule. It's a very good rule."

Should we, then, believe anything that McNamara says, anymore than people should have believed him when he gave press conferences extolling the "progress" being made in Vietnam? Are we really to believe that McNamara thinks that the people in positions such as he once occupied might have any interest whatsoever in his "lessons"? Can he possibly believe that the hawks are likely to modify their policies in the light of McNamara's own late-life conversion to dovedom? Perhaps not, since, near the end of the interview, he frankly laments how otiose is his entire project to transmit his "lessons" to future generations:

"I'm not so naïve or simplistic to believe we can eliminate war. We're not going to change human nature anytime soon. It isn't that we aren't rational. We are rational. But reason has limits."

If McNamara truly believes that there is no way to stop people from waging war, because they are going to do what they are going to do whatever he and other war critics say, then why does he bother saying anything at all?

McNamara's critics answer along the lines of Van Pelt's explanation of the existence of Holocaust revisionists: it's all about vanity, in the end. McNamara wants to believe that he can salvage something of his life, make amends with his past, and eventually pass away having contributed to rather than diminished the world in which he lived.

"At my age, 85, I'm at an age where I can look back and derive some conclusions about my actions. My rule has been try to learn, try to understand what happened. Develop the lessons and pass them on."

McNamara's tragic flaw, an admixture of vanity and pride, will accompany him to his grave. Still, Morris suggests, McNamara is no worse in this respect than is anyone else. The difference between McNamara and most other people is that McNamara applied his fallible



When appointed as Secretary, McNamara was lauded as "brainy," but reason has limits.



Agent orange was one of the "innovations"

implemented by the big
minds at the Pentagon.

intellect within the framework of the war machine and so his errors led directly to the deaths of fellow human beings. McNamara's case amplifies the tragedy of the human condition, by illustrating how, through the very humanness that we all share, some people end up by stripping other people of that very humanity.

At the end of *Mr. Death*, Fred Leuchter offers a "lesson" of his own:

"In 1957, I actually had the opportunity for the first time to sit in the chair. There's a legend that goes with the chair, relative to prison personnel and their families. There was a youngster, much the same age as I was when I sat in the chair, whose father was a guard at the institution, who toured the institution, and who sat in the electric chair. Some ten or twelve years later, he was executed in that same chair for the commission of a murder during an armed robbery. And so the legend grew that prison officials shouldn't allow their children to sit in the electric chair. I kind of sat in the chair waiting for something to happen. But, some twenty years later, I wound up making execution equipment instead of being the person the execution equipment was used on. So maybe the legend got turned around, and maybe we created a new legend, and some good came out of it after all."



Fred's opportunity to make
a career out of state
execution finally led to his
downfall.



Hindsight is 20/20.

Protagonists in each of these two films observe that, "Hindsight is twenty-twenty," and we do tend to regard our latest stories as the most accurate, for they are based upon our latest interpretation of what appears to us to be the most up-to-date information. The perennial epistemological problem in the moment is the at once trivial and profound tautology, that one simply does not know what one does not know. Even in a case as ghastly as the Germans under the Third Reich, many perfectly normal, law-abiding citizens no doubt persuaded themselves to believe something less outrageous than that their disappearing neighbors had been gassed to death, a nightmare which even the most grisly of horror fiction writers would be hard-pressed to invent.

Left with other people's accounts of what happened before us, we make our way about this confusing world, all the while writing in our minds new revisionist texts,



Fred alone on the road:
having destroyed his own
career through aiding the
Holocaust revisionists, he
now faces an existential
crisis of sorts.

just as Fred Leuchter did in the caves of Auschwitz, trying to answer the question whether this place could have really been used to gas innocent human beings to death. Just as Robert McNamara and Lyndon Johnson attempted to defend the nation against tyranny and aggression through the use of rapid-fire bombing and agent orange. Just as Robert Jan Van Pelt retraced the steps of Fred Leuchter to ascertain exactly what he did while at Auschwitz, committing sacrilege by bungling about that sacred place. Just as Ernst Zündel tried to save the world from what he wants to believe is the false story of the Holocaust. And just as Errol Morris did in making these films...

[Continued: Notes](#)



Bob alone on the road, with
plenty of time to think.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Elephant

An ordinary high school movie. Except that it's not.

by [John P. Garry III](#)

The major post-Columbine film and television productions—*Bang Bang You're Dead* (2001), *Home Room* (2003), *Bowling For Columbine* (2003)—fervently seek cultural, historical, and psychological explanations for the 1999 tragedy and other school shootings. These productions are verbally explicit, melodramatic, and visually conventional. They aim for a measure of redemption and narrative closure and employ familiar genre conventions (the stage play, the docudrama, the investigative piece).

Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003), also based on the Columbine shootings, takes a different approach. Van Sant changes the setting of the story from Colorado to Oregon (where the director lives), omits or changes many details of the shootings and created an art film—what he calls “a song or a poem” about the event—rather than a docudrama (Said 16). The film avoids simple melodramatic appeal (although the film does have drama) and is visually ambitious and distinctive. It employs conventions of the high school, juvenile delinquency/crime and suspense/thriller genres, but in unconventional ways. Van Sant offers explanations but he isn't overly interested in them.

When shooters-to-be Alex (Alex Frost) and Eric (Eric Deulen) watch a television documentary about Nazi Germany, Eric asks, “That’s Hitler, right?” suggesting that they are too ignorant of the subject for it to influence them. On the morning of the shootings the boys shower together and kiss. There is a long cinematic tradition of associating fascism and homosexuality: *Spartacus* (1960), *The Damned* (1969), *The Conformist* (1970), *Salo* (1976), *JFK* (1991), *Nixon*

Visually suggested
causality: video games



Eric plays a video game.



Real violence matches video game violence.

Visually suggested causality: Nazi Germany and contemporary gun culture are united in a single composition.



As a gun is being delivered to Alex, television features a documentary on the Third

(1995). But since Van Sant is gay and has created sympathetic gay characters in his films, he couldn't possibly intend this as an explanation—Alex and Eric as the new Leopold and Loeb. More likely the kiss is a David Hockneyesque fantasy and a genuine expression of sexual innocence. Eric says, “I've never even kissed anybody, have you?” fully aware that this is his last chance to do so.

Van Sant places more explanatory emphasis on violent video games and guns. The cartoonish point-and-shoot video game Eric plays is, in part, an intertextual joke, visually modeled on Van Sant's previous film *Gerry* (2002). But in another way it is no joke at all: a point-of-view shot of Alex firing down a school corridor at fellow students—the gun extending into the bottom-center of the shot—visually matches the video game.

During the shooting rampage the sounds of a bustling wilderness rise obtrusively on the soundtrack (a sound effects score called “Doors of Perception” by Hildegard Westerkamp). Are Alex and Eric reenacting their hunting experiences? One wall of Alex's garage is covered with a stack of chopped firewood while an animal skull and antlers hang on another wall, hinting at an outdoorsy, rail-splitter type of family. When the boys make their internet gun purchase, the website listing for “Texas Guns and Ammo” includes the keywords “cowboy” and “19th century gun,” linking the school massacre to American history. Is Van Sant suggesting that this tragedy is a logical outcome of America's frontier heritage—Richard Slotkin's regeneration through violence/gunfighter nation theses? An intriguing possibility.

A connection between Nazi Germany and American gun culture is quietly but chillingly suggested when the truck delivering the gun purchased online by the boys rolls into the background of a shot in which the television playing the Nazi documentary fills the foreground.

Van Sant omits the (now-discredited) Goth/Trench Coat Mafia angle as well as the killers' expectation of celebrity status. It's clear that jocks will be a favored target, and Alex is a victim of jock bullying, but it isn't severe or prolonged enough to provoke murder. When planning the attack Alex says, “Most importantly, have fun, man” (a quote from the Columbine killers). How

their sense of fun got so warped is not clear. None of these explanations—either individually or together—satisfactorily explain how the boys made the leap to murder.

In addition to addressing the challenge of how to represent a violent tragedy (which it does well) and how to depict the motivations of killers (which it does partially) *Elephant* explores the capabilities and limitations of cinematic representation itself. A parallel is made between how film depicts “reality” and how we try to understand a complex event like the Columbine shootings. The film uses style as metaphor. It uses form to make us rethink a question of content.

The form of the film is extraordinary. If cinema verite documentarian Frederick Wiseman (who made two films about high schools) and Stanley Kubrick (master of the corridor tracking shot) collaborated on a film it would look like *Elephant*. The film is composed primarily of lengthy, single take, sequence shots employing a mobile camera and a wide-angle lens. Scenes are rarely “covered” from multiple angles and then edited together in the conventional master shot/close up A/close up B manner. By using the full Academy aspect ratio of 1:1.33 instead of the usual “masked” wide screen ratio of 1:1.85 the images contain more information than the average movie, resulting in as much detail, clarity, and brightness as the 35mm format can deliver. The film was shot this way because it was intended for cable television, although Van Sant claims an allusion to Frederick Wiseman and 16mm educational films seen in high school (*Elephant* website). This is one of the few films in which it is recommended to watch the full screen rather than the letterbox DVD transfer.

The long takes depict dialogue interactions but also activity—such as walking from one part of the school to another—that would normally be edited out of a film. In two shots Nathan (Nathan Tyson) walks from the athletic field into the school, down a long corridor, meets his girlfriend Carrie (Carrie Finklea), with whom he walks and talks. Rather than starting the scene with the couple meeting, or omitting the uneventful section of his walk (almost three minutes without dialogue), Van Sant maintains strict continuity, even if it is excessive and tedious by traditional narrative film standards—an approach he took to an even greater extreme in *Gerry*. The suggestion, of course, is that on

a day like this, a day in which Nathan may be murdered, every moment is precious. And rather than being experienced as “uneventful” these passages contribute to a panoramic view of the school as a vast, thriving, honorable—if aged—institution, unlike the satirized schools common to teen comedies.

To complicate matters even more the camera often switches subject mid shot. Just before Nathan meets Carrie in the corridor the camera swivels over to observe three chatty “in crowd” girls (which, I have learned, are called “plastics”)—one of whom has a crush on Nathan—and then pans back to Nathan. In one particularly long shot (5 minutes 21 seconds) the camera follows the three girls—Jordan (Jordan Taylor), Brittany (Brittany Mountain) and Nicole (Nicole George)—down a corridor into the school cafeteria, breaks away from them to follow a server into the kitchen, observes two workers sneak away and light up a joint, follows a dish washer back into the cafeteria, and returns to the girls. The camera pans to the window to catch a glimpse of John (John Robinson) outside playing with a dog, then pans back to the girls, who bicker and leave the cafeteria. While the girls exit the camera tracks over to a conversation with a girl concerned with her singing ability and then tracks back to the three girls as they exit the cafeteria and go to the girls’ room. All in one shot.

In scenes like these Van Sant is practicing the *mise-en-scene*, *depth of field*, *sequence shot* or *long take* aesthetic favored by French film critic/theorist Andre Bazin (1918-1958) and practiced by filmmakers such as Robert Flaherty, Jean Renoir, Max Ophuls, Orson Welles, Jacques Tati, Andrei Tarkovsky, Miklos Jansco, Andrei Sokurov, Rob Tregenza, and Bela Tarr. This style emphasizes the continuous shot and the orchestration of multiple characters and objects within the frame. The long take contrasts with *montage*—the creation of meaning through the editing of dissimilar shots, whose seminal practitioner and theorist was Sergei Eisenstein. It also differs from the *continuity style*—the dominant mode in Hollywood filmmaking—in which the *mise-en-scene* of different shots is coordinated to create unobtrusive or “invisible” edits and create a fictional space by linking numerous, often static shots rather than exploring space in a continuous moving shot.

For *mise-en-scene* critics like Bazin composition in depth allows the viewer greater participation in the

creation of meaning and coincides more closely with how we experience the visual world while editing artificially imposes predetermined meanings on the viewer. The long take creates meaning within a single shot. Montage creates meaning between shots. Continuity editing seeks to render the transition between shots invisible. Most films use a combination of approaches.

Bazin asserts that the illusion of reality that most films strive for is based on a “fundamental deceit” because reality “exists in a continuous space, and the screen in fact presents us with a succession of tiny fragments called ‘shots.’” (Bazin 1972 80). Van Sant agrees with this theory:

“Since 1915, when people started to use editing to tell a story, we've had the convention of the reaction shot: I say something, then we cut to your reaction...But life is a continuous thing with a rhythm of its own, and when you cut to adjust that rhythm to suit the dramatic impact you create a new, false rhythm.” (Said 17).

For Bazin, depth of focus implies

“...a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress” (Bazin 1967 35-36).

Van Sant concurs and uses Bazinian rhetoric to describe the film:

“You just watch and make associations for yourself, as opposed to having the film-makers impose ideas on you,” (Said 17).

This approach is especially well suited to dramatizing Columbine because officials investigating the tragedy use the same rhetoric of open narrative construction. “We deal with facts; we present facts,” says Jefferson County Sheriff Division Chief John Kiebusch regarding the 2000 final report on the massacre.

“We'll make a diligent effort not to include a bunch of conclusions. Here are the facts: You read it and make your own conclusions” (Cullen 2).

Van Sant is very open about his inspirations and cites Hungarian director Bela Tarr's *Satantango* (1994) as a major influence on *Elephant* (Said 17). This seven-and-one-quarter hour, black-and-white film depicts a rain-sodden, isolated rural village whose joyless inhabitants follow a self-appointed messiah who turns out to be a government spy. Ambitiously and expertly crafted, the film has a stark Tarkovskian vision of muddy fields and vast plains, extremely long takes in the tradition of fellow Hungarian Miklos Jansco, and a Buñuelesque desecration of the Christ-Apostles story. Far more obscure and difficult than anything a mainstream American filmmaker could make, Van Sant derives from *Satantango* long, mobile shots of characters moving through space (often without dialogue), an ensemble cast, multiple, seemingly unrelated story lines, intertitles, mysterious music, one-sided dialogue scenes, and an observational tone.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

A realist style that undermines realism

Although in *Gerry* and *Elephant* Van Sant employs Bazinian principles more devotedly than most contemporary American filmmakers he also undermines the claim to realism these principle evoke. He revives the principles and demonstrates their limitation at the same time. Bazin advises,

“The camera cannot see everything at once, but it makes sure not to lose any part of what it chooses to see” (Bazin 1972 27).

Van Sant is not so circumspect. On the school athletic field, before Nathan begins his long walk, a football game is in progress. Instead of panning to follow the action the camera remains stationary and the game migrates in and out of the frame. The choice of what to see is partially ceded from the camera operator to the actors.

A more complex dialectic of inclusion-exclusion is created in a meeting of the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). A teacher and several students sit in a circle with the camera in the center. The camera pans/rotates steadily from one participant to another in a continuous left to right movement while people talk. But the person speaking isn't always the person onscreen. We hear people talking without seeing their faces and see people just listening. When someone starts talking the camera doesn't pan or cut to them in the manner of a typical documentary interview, but just keeps panning. We have to wait to be able to associate each voice with a face, which we can only partially accomplish. Whether we actually see the person talking is a matter of chance. No matter how much activity a wide angle lens and a mobile camera take in, activity is still excluded. What the camera sees, rather than being “obvious” or “natural,” can be arbitrary (Ray 286).

If the camera offers a rich but a limited point of view, how can a filmmaker depict a complex event such as

Repeated long takes of the same narrative moment



Corridor encounter: first version. Elias photographs John in the corridor while Michelle runs past.



Corridor encounter 2 shows the same action, seen in 180 degree reverse angle.



Corridor encounter 3: the moving camera follows Michelle as she moves past Elias and John.

the Columbine shootings? The traditional answer—innovated in simple movies like *The Great Train Robbery* (Edwin S. Porter, 1903)—is parallel montage: cutting back-and-forth between two or more sets of activity that the viewer intuitively feels to be occurring simultaneously. D.W. Griffith perfected this technique in the suspenseful climaxes of films such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Way Down East* (1920), and *America* (1924) in which trapped, terrified women are intercut with men racing to their rescue. Eisenstein used this technique for political as well as melodramatic ends in films such as *Strike* (1924) and *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) in which violent conflicts involving large crowds are depicted by intercutting many different areas of action and representatives of different social classes. But if a filmmaker forswears montage, as Van Sant largely has in *Elephant*, how can he encompass different points of view? Van Sant has set himself a difficult problem and he crafts an unusual solution, a solution inspired by Tarr's *Satantango*: he repeats scenes and photographs them differently each time.

In the most-cited example, the camera precedes shutterbug Elias (Elias McConnell) down the main school corridor. He meets his friend John, asks him to pose for a picture, John does so, they chat briefly and continue on their separate ways, the camera reversing itself and following John down the hall and out of the school. Barely noticeable in the background is a long-legged girl in a red shirt running down the hall past the two boys (we've seen her previously on the school athletic field, but probably don't make the connection on the first viewing). Sixteen minutes later, without warning, we are sent back in time and observe this scene again. This time the camera *follows* Elias into the scene and we view the action from the opposite side of the "action line" or 180-degree axis established previously. Again, the girl scurries by, this time away from the camera in the middle ground of the shot. Since the first version of this scene we have actually met his girl, Michelle (Kristen Hicks). But because of her placement in the frame we still might not notice or identify her. When we view this scene a third time the camera follows Michelle. This time we recognize her and know that she is hurrying from gym class to duties in the school library. She and the camera rush past John and Elias without pausing. Shifting the perspective of the previous scenes, Michelle is now the figure of identification while Elias and John are extras just barely visible and audible in the blurry

background.

To resolve this dilemma of point of view, to depict the scene thoroughly, to be “objective” in the journalistic sense, Van Sant violates temporal continuity—one of the qualities associated with long takes. There are cinematic precedents for viewing an action from different points of view. *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Rashomon* (1950) and *JFK* (1991) are among the most famous. *Wonderland* (2003) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) are two of the most recent. In these films characters relate their experience of a person or event and come to different conclusions, demonstrating the subjectivity of truth.

But *Elephant* doesn't work that way. The action within each version of this unremarkable scene is scrupulously identical, while the visual differences derive from where the camera is, not the subjective interpretation of each character. Van Sant is addressing more purely cinematic questions. From whose point of view should dramatic action be viewed? Aren't characters in the background just as important as characters in the foreground? Shouldn't what leads up to the scene and what follows it be included as well? When dramatizing Columbine who should the camera follow? The killers? The victims? The survivors? The implication is that if a simple event like two people meeting in a corridor has so many facets then an event like the Columbine shootings may be entirely too complex to depict. The issue of point of view is also embedded in the title of the film, which derives in part from the story of the blind men and the elephant. Each man, according to the fable, has an inadequate understanding of what an elephant is because each one touches a different part of the elephant. They're all right but also wrong. Likewise, each version of the Elias-John-Michelle scene is true, but also incomplete.

Van Sant may want to avoid the “false rhythm” of traditional continuity editing but these repetitions yield an even stranger rhythm. Van Sant is reaching back before Griffith and Eisenstein and *The Great Train Robbery* to Porter's truly archaic *The Life of an American Fireman* (Copyright Version, 1903) in which the rescue of a woman from a burning house is shown in its entirety from two different angles that are edited sequentially rather than intercut (Cook 23). In the temporal design of the film as a whole, Van Sant has

Moments when the narrative withholds information we want to know



At the end of the film, Alex corners Nathan and Carrie in the freezer. We do not know if he shoots them or what happens to him.



Michelle hears the sound of a gun being cocked and looks off screen...



... but instead of a corresponding POV shot, Van Sant cuts to a completely different scene, leaving Michelle's glance "unanswered."

A visual generation gap:
John and his father



Father and son are in the same space but....



...separated by framing.

actually turned parallel montage inside out by crosscutting two sets of scenes (the day of the shooting and the "Alex & Eric" scenes from the previous day) that cannot be happening simultaneously.

The viewer is placed in a state of almost constant temporal dislocation. No punctuation identifying time shifts is provided, various scenes and pieces of action are repeated, and scenes are held in limbo and continued many scenes later. Nathan and Carrie's hallway scene is "paused" for 88 minutes and resumes when the shooting commences. The scenes taking place on the day of the shooting describe a sequence of events that actually takes *less* time than the screen time—a rarity in narrative film. The film, then, is a temporal puzzle picture—*Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Kansas City* (1996), *Run Lola Run* (1998), *Memento* (2000), *Code Unknown* (2000), *Amores Perros* (2000), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), *Kill Bill* (2003-4), *21 Grams* (2003), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004)—in which the viewer must mentally reassemble the scenes to understand their linear chronology.

While Van Sant acknowledges the limitations of the camera he creates even more frustrating omissions through editing. Van Sant (who also edited the film) deliberately truncates scenes so that the final outcome is withheld from us. Before Michelle is shot in the library Elias, who happens to be standing nearby, snaps a photo of Alex. Alex merely glances blankly in Elias' direction (perhaps he likes the idea of being documented), turns back to Michelle, and starts shooting. Will Elias be one of the victims? Will he live to develop these photos? We never find out (this question has even provoked a debate on *Elephant's* Internet Movie Database message board). Later, Alex bursts into the girls' bathroom and confronts Jordan, Nicole, and Brittany. Will he shoot? Will he find out about the girl hiding in a nearby stall? Unknown.

The film concludes in the school kitchen. Alex has cornered Nathan and Carrie in the freezer (slabs of meat hang behind Alex, underscoring his own butchery). The terrified couple pleads with and rebukes Alex, who recites a childish lyric and pins them down with his weapon. The camera tracks backwards away from the scene. Cut to the closing titles. We never find out if Alex shoots one or both of them. We never find out what finally happens to Alex. We never find out



Photographing two people sitting in a car is common, but Van Sant makes a special effort to keep the generations separated.

Visual generation gap between students and administrators



Nathan and Carrie talk to an off-screen administrator.



John talks to an unidentified administrator.

how many people are killed, who they are, or how the community responds to the tragedy. These omissions frustrate some of our basic film viewing assumptions: when a crucial action is set in motion (such as a stand-off involving a gun) we will be shown the conclusion; the film will provide a summary or overview of events; we will find out the fates of the main characters.

One suspects that these omissions occur in part because Van Sant wanted to avoid turning the film into an action film spectacle which would make audiences eager for violence rather than horrified by it. He doesn't want viewers to respond to the carnage the way Alex and Eric respond to their own gunplay: "Whoa, dude, that was awesome." Van Sant says of the staged violence,

"It was not heightened and exciting. We certainly didn't want it to be cool looking..."
(LaBruce 22).

Van Sant doesn't overwhelm the viewer with brutality in the manner of, say, of Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* (2000). He practices restraint—a rare quality in mainstream cinema today. The dramatic result of these omissions is to give the climax the feeling of something so swift, unexpected, and chaotic that the film simply can't take it all in, of events so horrifying that the film's "memory" has repressed them before we have a chance to see them.

Although this withholding of information is at its most extreme during the shooting, throughout the film we are made aware of things happening off screen, as in the football game and the GSA meeting. The first shot of the film (a time-lapse view of a sky changing from dusk to night) is accompanied by the sound of young people playing football (presumably the boys later seen playing on the school athletic field). We hear them but don't see them. Alex and Eric's entry into the library, where they will begin their rampage, occurs off screen. A medium-close shot of Michelle accompanies the sound of guns being cocked. Michelle turns and glances past the camera with a frown. But the expected point of view shot of what Michelle is looking at is omitted. Instead, the film shifts back to Alex's bathroom earlier in the day. We must intuit that Alex and Eric entered the library. There is no immediate visual confirmation. Van Sant's impatience with "the convention of the reaction shot" is evident here.



As Michelle walks from the athletic field to the gym, a PE teacher scolds her, screen right, and drifts in and out of a tracking shot that favors Michelle.

Visual generation gap:
Eric and Alex



Eric has breakfast with faceless parents.



Alex and unseen delivery man, delivering the gun.

Many of the adults are only partially viewed, suggesting that adults and teenagers live in the same space but occupy different worlds. In the first dialogue scene, when John takes the wheel of the family car in place of his hung-over father (Timothy Bottoms), the camera pans between the two characters, framing them individually. Photographing two people sitting together in the front seat of a car is a very common type of shot, and Van Sant makes a special effort to keep them separated. They are framed together only briefly (and are visually reunited during the massacre—the only redemptive element in the climax). The scene concludes with father and son talking, but with Mr. Robinson in the center of the shot and John almost completely outside the frame.

Similarly, in the school office Nathan, Carrie, and John talk to administrators who are almost never seen when spoken to. When Michelle walks from the athletic field to the gym the PE teacher who scolds her drifts in and out of a tracking shot that favors Michelle. In the breakfast scene Alex's mother and father speak but their faces are framed out of the shot. Later, the driver who delivers the gun is off-screen when he speaks to the boys.

This isolation of characters is also effected through selective focus. When John makes a phone call to his home the principal, Mr. Lewis, (Matt Malloy) enters the shot in the background, which is out of focus. But rather than shifting focus back to Lewis when he speaks the focus remains on John in the foreground and Lewis remains a just-recognizable blur (he is additionally obscured by a plexiglass panel that juts into the frame). Not all the tracking shots use depth of focus. In many shots the space beyond the characters is a blur (rather unlike Welles' and Kubrick's deep focus tracking shots). The characters often seem to be moving within a sort of bubble (as in the hallway tracking shot following Michelle cited earlier), the world around them glowing but ill-defined.

When Michelle changes clothes in the girl's locker room the camera views her from above in a medium-close shot. We hear voices muttering derogatory phrases, presumably about her. We can see some girls out-of-focus in the background but can't identify them or be completely certain they are the ones talking. Since Michelle is changing clothes sitting down, and was ordered earlier by her gym teacher to wear shorts instead of sweats to PE, we suspect that she is shy,

Isolation through
selective focus



Teacher and student unified
by framing, separated by
focus.



Michelle, isolated visually
and emotionally, endures
the ridicule of partially
viewed classmates.

Disjunction of
cause and effect:



perhaps embarrassed, about her body. This tight shot effectively conveys her social isolation and desire to hide herself from the world. The off-screen ridicule demonstrates her justified paranoia and the type of bullying which motivates Alex and Eric (Michelle and the killers are linked editorially several times in the film).

These exclusionary techniques often produce a disjunction of cause and effect. At the beginning of the “Alex & Eric” sequence, the camera begins on a science teacher speaking at the front of the class. The camera pans to students asking questions. One male student with a crew cut (one of the “dumb-ass jocks” the shooters despise) turns around and throws something towards the back of the class. The camera pans over to Alex, who is splattered with spitball particles. The standard way to render this scene would be to show the jock throwing, cut to Alex being hit, then cut to reaction shots of the jocks and other students. But Van Sant shoots it so the jock appears to be throwing something at no one in particular and Alex appears with the mess already on him (the behind-the-scenes documentary of the film suggests that this was how the scene was staged). Then, more glop flies in from off screen and pelts Alex. But was it thrown by the crew cut or by the boy in the letterman jacket next to him? (which appears to be Nathan). Thus in one shot we see a character throw something at an unseen target and see another character hit with something thrown by an unseen assailant. Cause and effect, action and reaction are split. Each party—the teacher, the jocks, Alex—are part of the same shot, the same continuous geographic space, but are visually isolated through framing, existing in separate worlds. This suggests disunity, discord, and disconnection that contradict the wholeness—the Bazinian-humanist assumptions—communicated by the long takes and wide-angle views.

These unexpected repetitions, deliberate omissions, and departures from the continuity style of classical Hollywood cinema move the film away from the nominally “realist” long-take tradition of Bazin-Renoir-Welles and closer to the modernist, anti-illusionist theories and practices of Bertholt Brecht and Jean-Luc Godard. Godard has made the denaturalizing of film language—the split of cause and effect—his life’s work. *Contempt* (1963) concludes with a car crash that kills the central couple. But it occurs off screen, the crucial moment omitted, like the unseen crucial moments during *Elephant*’s shootout. Godard invented the

A continuous shot reveals separate worlds. The teacher answers a question, the camera pans left and...



... the shot continues. Jock bullies unseen student. Camera continues pan left to reveal...



... Alex covered in spitballs, tormented by now off-screen students.

The craftsmanship of photography

deliberately disjointed shootout in his first feature film, *Breathless* (1959). Godard has described his early film practice as “research in the form of spectacle” (Milne 181). Van Sant describes *Elephant* as investigation in the form of drama:

“I knew there would be no dramatic coverage of the event because of the way we think of drama as entertainment and not as investigative...My reaction was, why not? Why don't we use drama to look into something like this?” (Said 16).

The relationship of photography (and by extension, cinema and all modes of representation) to “reality” is addressed in a sequence shot in which Elias, walking to school with his still camera, asks a young punk couple if he can take their picture. They consent, but he doesn't “document” them in a neutral or objective manner. He directs them the way a film director would, telling them where to walk, how close to stand together, and directing them to kiss. Photography—once considered a purely mechanical, even inartistic, art—is just as subjective as any other art form. A metaphor for Van Sant's use of Columbine as subject matter is suggested. Just as Elias “finds” the couple and then manipulates them for his own purposes, Van Sant found a pre-existing subject and shaped it to suit his own interests. The subsequent photography lab and darkroom scenes show how much work actually goes into making a photograph and how the results can be manipulated further in the printing stage. Images don't just “happen,” but are laboriously and consciously crafted.

Elias can be seen as a director surrogate in this and other scenes. Like Van Sant, he casts unknowns and documents outsiders. Elias and the punk couple engage in improvisation, just as Van Sant did with *Elephant's* actors. Although Elias uses a still camera, he walks ahead of the couple in the manner of the tracking shots so abundant in *Elephant*. The punk boy is eager to do a nude scene, but Elias vetoes the idea, just as a film director might veto an over-eager actor's suggestions. (This indirectly raises the question of who suggested Alex and Eric shower together—the actors or the director?)

The amount of time the film devotes to the process of photography can also be read as a comment—even complement—on Van Sant's shooting style, which



Elias cuts film the old-fashioned way, as ...



... Van Sant edits film the old-fashioned way, on a flatbed instead of computer, as shown here in a behind-the-scenes documentary.

relies less on post-production manipulation of the image than most Hollywood productions today. The lingering shot of Elias dutifully rotating a film-developing canister in his hands as if it were a talisman makes film-based photography a process of almost medieval artisanal patience. Van Sant's old school impulses are confirmed by the fact that *Elephant* was edited on film, a method becoming just as rare as the film bath. Just as Elias cuts his processed film with scissors, Van Sant cut his movie with a splicer. In the age of the digital image and the posthuman narrative, *Elephant* adheres to a 20th century cinematic ideal.

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Social implications of Van Sant's style and the filmic treatment of kids gone bad

A larger, related question of signification (how objects and actions are invested with meaning and how those meanings are read) is raised in the GSA discussion group. The topic is whether or not you can tell if a person is gay based on appearance. The teacher asks, "How can you tell? *Can* you tell?" (The viewer may also be tempted to try to "tell" which students are gay and which are straight.) There is no consensus. "Dyed pink hair" and "wearing tons of rainbow paraphernalia" is conclusive for some students, but not for others. One straight student wears rainbow gear as a sign of solidarity. Another student hypothesizes that a straight person could wear rainbow gear just for the heck of it. In true postmodern fashion a sign and its referent are separable. Markers of identity can be adopted at will. The reuse and re-motivation of signs is also referenced in the television documentary. It describes how Hitler "stole" imagery from Hindu symbology (the swastika), Ancient Rome (the standard), and Mussolini (the fascist salute) for the Third Reich (thus Hitler becomes the first postmodern appropriationist).

These discussions resonate throughout the film. How can you spot a potential schoolyard shooter? Do the now-accepted "signs" (violent entertainment, access to guns, bullying) really tell us anything? Van Sant surrounds Alex in particular with a variety of personal, cultural, and social markers that point in different directions. Alex is associated with artistic creativity and gun culture, two things not usually allied. When we first see him dappled with spitballs he is drawing in a journal and drawings decorate his basement bedroom walls. There is a graffiti art canvas on the wall as well. The word "Arte" is legible in the painting, suggesting the marriage of fine art and street art, and perhaps the mixed nature of Alex's identity.

Gangsta rap and hard rock are the current musical

signs—some say the causes—of youth violence. But then what do we make of Alex playing Mozart and Beethoven on the piano? Isn't classical music a sign of cultivation, the best Western Civ has to offer? (Stanley Kubrick used classical music ironically as a sign of youth violence and the decadence of modern civilization in *A Clockwork Orange*). Alex wears a faded Arc d' Triomphe t-shirt throughout the film, enhancing his link with European high culture, suggesting that he has either visited Paris with his parents or with a school group.

Bullying, a common explanation for the schoolyard shootings of the last decade, is obviously a motivation for Alex but not for Michelle. She doesn't turn against her fellow students. In fact, she works in the school library, serving the very community that pressures and ridicules her. And we aren't the only ones looking for signs of troubled teens. According to Jordan and Brittany, their mothers not-so-secretly search through their possessions for signs of misbehavior (drugs, presumably). The closest thing the film has to a “goth” (which the Columbine shooters were incorrectly identified as) is the retro-punk couple Elias photographs. But they are just nice kids, certainly more admirable than the more outwardly “normal” Alex and Eric. Just as “rainbow gear” doesn't necessarily indicate homosexuality, punk gear doesn't necessarily indicate alienation, rebellion, or street-life poverty.

Physical homosexuality is the most troubling sign Van Sant introduces into the story. If “rainbow gear” doesn't “prove” someone is gay, does Alex and Eric's kiss prove they are gay? If Eric has never kissed anyone then presumably Alex has never kissed him either. Are they acting on a whim? Is their sexual acting out a sign that they are too “into each other?” Gay or not, does this have anything to do with their subsequent violence? Placed after their Hitler-viewing and gun firing and just before the killings their kiss is positioned as additional evidence of aberration, leading critic Todd McCarthy to call the boys “gay-inclined Nazis.” Scott Foundas of the *LA Weekly* strongly criticizes Van Sant for thoughtlessly adopting early, unsubstantiated (and now largely discredited) rumors that the Columbine killers were gay. Van Sant claims to have not heard such rumors before he made the film. (Foundas, 4, LaBruce 18)

Van Sant is sensitive to criticisms of this scene. He asserts the boys are not gay, likening the boys' behavior

to warriors before battle, (homosociality rather than homosexuality) and confesses dissatisfaction with the scene, claiming that Eric's line about never having been kissed was an awkwardly placed "disclaimer" to prevent the very objections that have been raised (LaBruce 18). Even if you assume the boys are gay, they are certainly not representative. The GSA discussion group has several and they don't seem to be killers. One critic sees the kiss as a humane gesture,

"...Van Sant uses Eric and Alex's sexuality as a way to make them human, *as a way to make us like them.*" (Cummings 100).

Either through miscalculation or willfulness, Van Sant dares us to examine what homosexuality is a sign of in this context.

The most persistent sign in the juvenile delinquency/crime genre is social environment; a matrix of economic status, physical surroundings, family structure, and sundry cultural influences, usually popular music and drugs. Until the 1970s American cinema usually adopted a liberal, Rousseauist perspective:

"Bad kids...were victims of society, and the causes of delinquency lay out there, in the environment. Since human nature was good, kids were essentially okay" (Biskind 198).

Delinquency is a result of nurture, not nature. The basic narrative of the genre describes how ineffective, incomplete, or absent parental authority causes or allows teens to create substitute families (often gangs) and homes (a crash pad, squat, or drug den). These ad-hoc families are just as dysfunctional as the biological families the kids are escaping and usually disintegrate through a combination of lawlessness, internal conflict and external pressure from society. Occasionally, good kids can be peeled off from bad kids and reintegrated with society, sometimes with the help of a surrogate parent: a social worker, teacher, or police officer.

In the 1930s Warner Brothers Studios emphasized the environmental causes of crime in its gangster films and related juvenile crime films. In *Wild Boys of the Road* (William Wellman, 1933) loyal, self-sacrificing Andy Hardy-style youths are driven to petty crime and open revolt by Depression hardships. The parents are equally victimized by social conditions and are

blameless for their children's waywardness. Shots of factories and smokestacks in these films appear with "desire to escape" implicitly stamped all over them.

The movies' equation of juvenile delinquency and popular culture was established in the opening title sequence of *Blackboard Jungle*, which is scored to Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock." Rock 'n' roll implicitly exacerbates environmental influences. *Blackboard Jungle* pointedly contrasts a crime-ridden urban high school with an idyllic suburban high school where we hear the national anthem instead of rock 'n' roll. Suburbanization is presented as a social cure-all.

At the same time low-budget exploitations films geared for drive-in theaters with lurid titles such as *Teen-Age Strangler* (1965), *The Bloody Brood* (1965) *Teen-Age Gang Debs* (1966) and *Just For the Hell of It* (1967) presented delinquents as out-of-control gangs bent on rape, pillage and plunder. Although these films were not meant to be taken seriously, they clearly posit a turbulent teen nature, rather than environment, as the cause of delinquency.

But what happens when the economic explanation for delinquency doesn't apply? How do you account for delinquency in the midst of prosperity? *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955) is the transitional film of the juvenile delinquency genre because emotional, not economic poverty is the cause of delinquency. *Rebel* is the model for liberal, ameliorative films such as *Ordinary People* (1980), *Lost Angels* (1989), *crazy/beautiful* (2001), *thirteen* (2003), and Van Sant's *Good Will Hunting* (1997) and *Finding Forrester* (2000). In these films adults are as messed up as the kids and need to get their own acts together before they can set youth on the right path.

The first killer kid movie, *The Bad Seed* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1956), is something of an anomaly because it insists on heredity rather than environment as the reason for a young girl's scheming murderousness. In fact, several characters engage in a nature vs. nurture debate. Spokesmen for criminology and medical science confidently dismiss the heredity thesis, but are proven wrong when the girl's mother learns that she is actually the offspring of a murderess. Although the film tries to keep the environmental thesis off the table, the father is absent from the home during most of the action (he's a de facto deadbeat dad) and the family lives in a duplex rather than a house, which in

American cinema is a sign of a family in peril.

The rise of the youth counter-culture of the 1960s transformed juvenile delinquency into heroism—or more accurately, anti-heroism. Young people escape from or attack their social environment in *If...* (1968), *Zabriskie Point* (1970), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Massacre at Central High* (1976), and *The Warriors* (1979). In these films nurture means conformity and repression and should be resisted in favor of an uninhibited youthful nature. Demonic delinquency films such as *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Omen* (1976), *Carrie* (1976) and *The Fury* (1978) cite the devil or supernatural powers as the problem. Although *The Omen's* Damien is evil at heart, *The Exorcist's* Regan (who has an absent dad) is a good girl possessed by an evil spirit that can be exorcized.

One of the most disturbing and poignant films of this apocalyptic youth cycle is *Over the Edge* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1979). Based on a true incident, bored and ignored middle school teens turn to insubordination, drugs, guns, and vandalism. A frustrated police officer shoots a 14 year old and teens go on a vengeful rampage, trap their teachers and parents in the school auditorium and trash the school. Shot on location, the desolateness of suburbia is vividly felt for the first time in the genre. Reversing the pro-suburbia terms of *Blackboard Jungle*, open space is not an antidote to crowded slums, but a sign of social disconnection and spiritual emptiness, a vacuum waiting to be filled by delinquency.

During the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s counter-culture was out and adult authority was back in. This shift is reflected in films in which delinquents—often punks or hip hop youth—are dealt with forcefully by school officials: *Class of 1984* (1982), *Lean on Me* (1989), *Class of 1999* (1990), *The Substitute* (1996). The parental substitute is now a vigilante figure (in the *Substitute* films, he's a Rambo-like ex-mercenary). As in *Blackboard Jungle* good teens are peeled away from the irredeemable. Reversing the liberal environmental perspective, bad social environments do not create juvenile delinquency, juvenile delinquents create bad social environments.

In the gangsta/hood films of the 1990s the forces that undermine the delinquent gang are pulling an entire community apart. The poor African-American neighborhood is far more isolated and violent than the

ethnic enclaves in the Warner Bros. films of the 1930s. Unique to these films is racial despair, a bitter sense that in America blackness is both a curse and a license for self-annihilation. "It's tough being black in America," counsels a parent in *Menace II Society* (1993). "The hunt is on. And you're the prey." But since these films are also gangster thrillers the brutality and nihilism are counterbalanced by the lively depiction of urban slang, charismatic criminality, youthful high spirits, the satisfactions of revenge, and the glamorousness of the gangsta lifestyle.

The juvenile delinquency/crime genre is now in its sociopath phase. Although youth crime, teen childbirths, and certain types of drug usage are statistically lower now than in the previous decades, highly publicized events such as the Central Park jogger attack, the Spur Posse, the pre-Millennial school shootings, and continuing gang violence in large cities have given young people their worse reputation ever. The latest moral panic—the most salacious yet—involves a supposed "epidemic" of oral sex in the nation's middle schools, documented by no less a literary luminary than Tom Wolfe. When commentators discuss urban "superpredators," a "lost generation" of African-American youth, executing juveniles, "Pavlovian dogs" addicted to consumerism (Tyre 44), or the Columbine massacre as paradigmatic of youth today, they are saying that nurture is ineffective in the face of a corrupted—or at least easily corruptible—nature.

Like the girl in *The Bad Seed*, movie teens are seen as "born without pity." The characteristics of antisocial personality disorder (ADP)—egocentrism, sadism, lack of empathy, inability to feel remorse—are depicted as inherent to youth, like measles, not as aberrations. Rather than argue with parents and take out their rage on a repressive society teens exist in isolated tribes and victimize each other, while the sources of their rage and oppression are ill-defined. The male characters in particular seem to be driven by fears of powerlessness, victimization, and humiliation that propel them to extreme acts. The orgiastic violence that seemed exaggerated in 1950s exploitation films is now—in the age of "wilding"—depicted as a real-world possibility.

We could understand, and to varying degrees sympathize with, the rebellious youth of *Rebel Without a Cause*, *A Clockwork Orange*, and *Over the Edge*. But the troubled teens of *That Was Then This is Now*

(1985), *River's Edge* (1986), *Permanent Record* (1988), *Kids* (1995), *Pups* (1999), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *George Washington* (2000), *Bully* (2001), *All About Lily Chou Chou* (2001), *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002), *Home Room*, *Mean Creek* (2004) and *Elephant* are mysterious, their crimes inexplicable or merely vengeful. The liberal environmental critique has been modified by an implicit conservative moral perspective: kids go bad because they are too independent, too wealthy, too mobile, too sexual, and too free. Dr. Laura has replaced Dr. Spock.

River's Edge (Tim Hunter, 1986) is the locus classicus of this phase. High schoolers in a small California town, out of peer group loyalty, fail to report the murder of one of their classmates by her boyfriend. The grimness of the premise (based on a true event) is leavened by black humor, Crispin Glover's showy turn as the slightly crazed ringleader, a "good" teen romance to balance out the "bad" teen romance, and a thriller climax in which Keanu Reeves is able, 1950s-style, to "get through" to his angered, gun-wielding half-brother (essentially an optimistic reworking of the climax of *Rebel Without a Cause* in which Jim saves Plato). But the characterization of the killer is still chilling: a misogynistic grunge oaf who snuffs out his girlfriend with the indifference of a bratty child squishing a bug.

Sexuality is one of the major differences between contemporary youth films and pre-1970s films. In *Rebel Without a Cause* James Dean and Natalie Wood managed only some light kissing. Promiscuous, adulterous parents implicitly pave the way for teen sex and violence in *Pretty Poison* (1968), and *Last Summer* (1969). In comedies like *Animal House* (1978), *Porky's* (1982), *Risky Business* (1983) and *American Pie* (1999) sexual satisfaction is a youth's natural right, irrespective of parental example. In delinquency/crime films the more sexually active youths are, the more violent they are, while sexuality is tinged with brutality and humiliation.

At the height of the destruction in *Over the Edge* Michael—a fugitive hero among the teens—stands with his arm around his new girlfriend while a trashcan fire blazes in the foreground. Sexual and destructive teen ids have been released simultaneously. The killer in *River's Edge* gets the same feeling of power and control killing his girlfriend as he did having sex with her. In *Kids*, a relatively innocent skinny-dipping session contrasts a later rape scene. *Bully* depicts one of the

most brutal killings in the genre and the most sexualized teens. Sexual deception leads to rape and multiple murders in *Boys Don't Cry*. The only non-virgin aboard the rowboat in *Mean Creek* precipitates the drowning death of the bully. This sex-violence connection is confirmed by the fact that in non-violent films such as *Clueless* (1995), *Ten Things I Hate About You* (1999), *Bring it On* (2000), *Love Don't Cost a Thing* (2003), *You Got Served* (2004) and the John Hughes films teens are improbably chaste.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Settings, social and natural



The vastness of Watt High School...

Elephant is clearly in the post-*Rebel Without a Cause*, prosperity-isn't-enough mode. The wide-angle views of Alex's spacious, immaculate, warmly colored (if stylistically dated) living room tell us that material lack is not the problem. Critics disagree on whether the film's primary setting—Watt High School—is convincingly drab or too beautiful. Foundas calls it

“...a carefully composed dreamscape of high school, in which every floor is meticulously waxed, every shaft of afternoon sunlight unerringly placed, and where the autumn leaves are forever falling from mighty oak trees.” (Foundas 3)

But for Peter Ian Cummings,

“...the minimalist strings of sterile lockers and granite floors is [sic] recognizably threatening.” (Cummings 100).

There's truth in both positions. The school is aged (it was closed when filming occurred) and Van Sant occasionally presents it as vast and underpopulated, like the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980). Michelle's alienation is visually rendered by a wide-angle shot showing her as a dot within the empty gymnasium. The large, carpeted room in which Acadia (Alicia Miles) kisses a tearful John is strangely barren and seems to extend upward into infinity. But overall the school doesn't come off too badly. The school officials and teachers are refreshingly free of caricature. During Nathan's lengthy stroll from the athletic field through the school we see or hear a football game, girls' calisthenics, Frisbee tossing, a guitar player, a break dancer, a choral practice, and a class lecture—signs of a diverse, active, creative student body, an educational peaceable kingdom.

But Foundas is also right. Is the film merely prettified or does visual beauty function in a meaningful way?



... and the vastness of *The Shining's* Overlook Hotel.



John in a strangely barren and expansive school

lounge is photographed very similarly to ...



... ghostly twin girls in a strangely expansive game room in the Overlook Hotel.

Visual beauty



Trouble in paradise is indicated by this high angle long shot of bad driving on a beautiful street.



The park is a state of

The second shot of the narrative proper is a high angle tracking shot of a white Mercedes driving sloppily down a tree-lined residential street. The leaves are radiant autumnal orange, red and gold. The car sideswipes parked cars and almost runs over a kid on a bike. The contrast between natural beauty and human recklessness suggests *Trouble in Paradise* as the film's theme. It's also one of Van Sant's basic themes since the same fall foliage appears in Van Sant's *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989) and *My Own Private Idaho* (1991). A park near the school, where Elias photographs the punk couple, is carpeted with leaves and is free of trash and graffiti (compare this to the weedy fields kids wander through in *Over the Edge*).

The school building is in the unloved mid-century, late-Brutalist pavilion style, but is almost always framed with green grass and trees while sunlight warms hard, impersonal corridors. Even during the shooting, as John darts around the parking lot, luminous fall foliage fills the background. Like Douglas Sirk, Stanley Kubrick, and Terrence Malick, Van Sant uses architectural order and visual lushness ironically. Beauty—man-made and otherwise—lulls the viewer and belies an oppressive and violence-prone social order.

In the delinquency/crime genre social and class signifiers are used very systematically. A flat-top and letterman jacket always signify "jock bully." Rich parents are always snooty, demanding, and expect leniency for their delinquent children. Van Sant uses familiar signifiers with more complexity than usual. Alex's father is the "NASCAR dad" of contemporary punditry. He informs the boys: "Gerritt's got the poll this week, Eric, and track record." The father wears a baseball cap and an un-tucked denim work shirt, suggesting outdoor or manual labor. Alex refers to his shotgun as his "shottie," suggesting that he shoots regularly, presumably with friends or family. So, is Alex a product of Middle American, blue collar, "red state" NRA Republicans? Or is he a sexually ambiguous, culturally cosmopolitan, sensitive artistic type? Dissolving such easy oppositions is obviously Van Sant's point. Alex's family, however, isn't the only one associated with guns. In the first scene John and his father (who looks very much the white-collar, Volvo-driving "blue state" yuppie Democrat) talk about hunting with grandfather's gun. The transmission of gun culture from one generation to the next is not restricted to Alex's family and its attendant socio-

nature, through which Elias walks to school.



As Nathan walks back from the athletic field, the schoolyard is shot like a greenbelt within the city.



During the massacre, John walks around outside the school building, with the imagery emphasizing natural beauty even then.

political characteristics.

Elephant shares with *Bully* the depressing suggestion that even intact families are powerless to prevent youth violence. In both films families have meals together. Fathers and sons have interests in common (or at least the fathers assume they do). But this type of interaction, which is assumed to produce healthy kids, is not enough. Alex's basement bedroom-studio can be seen as the equivalent of the hide-out/crash pad common to the delinquency genre—a space where teens can be themselves but also hatch dangerous schemes. Unlike *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks, 1955), and *The Substitute* there is no parental figure—surrogate or otherwise—looking out for the boys. Adults and teens are too completely segregated for such a relationship to develop. When Mr. Lewis tries to engage Eric the way Ray (Edward Platt) engaged Jim in *Rebel Without a Cause*, it is much too late: the killing has already begun and Mr. Lewis is cowering on the floor under Eric's gun.

Elephant is muffled about the connection between teen sex and teen violence, in part because Van Sant has always been more interested in sexual and gender fluidity than sex as the gateway to violence. None of *Elephant*'s characters are overtly driven by lust. Carrie's possible pregnancy raises the old hygiene film theme of the Wages of Lust, but Nathan and Carrie aren't the problem; the virginal Alex and Eric are. The least sexualized characters are the most dangerous. Alex and Eric's kiss can be seen as a reflexive gesture to fulfill the sex-leads-to-violence formula common to the socioopathic teen mode.

The film leaves the old nature-versus-nurture question unanswerable. Or perhaps unasked. Films in the sociopath-delinquent mode tend to ignore the normal-abnormal, nature-nurture binaries in favor of depicting delinquency as an existential condition: youth transgress because they are and they can. Binary categories might also be replaced by bipolar personalities: the bully in *Mean Creek* is by turns brutal and child-like. His duality is finally sentimentalized as a sublime-tragic incarnation of warring adolescent impulses. Nature-versus-civilization has been replaced by human nature divided against itself. Perhaps the current phase of the juvenile delinquency/crime genre equivocates on the nature-nurture issue because the current definition of

Gunplay and the disjunction of cause and effect



Eric shoots at an unseen target. The camera pans left...



... and the shot continues as a woodpile is pelted by gunfire from a now unseen shooter.

sociopathology acknowledges genetic, biochemical, and environmental causes. It can be nature and/or nurture.

Elephant engages this theme by making nature itself unreliable. The science teacher confidently describes the activity of electrons, which move predictably between orbitals based on energy stimulation. In the GSA meeting students discuss the problem of “gay rams”: sheep ranchers purchase expensive males for breeding purposes that sometimes grow up to be gay and therefore, for the rancher’s purposes, useless. Rams and electrons are equally parts of nature, but not equally predictable.

When Alex and Eric drive to school and enter the campus armed the various temporal strands converge (much like the time-divergent strands in Altman’s *Kansas City* and Minghella’s *Cold Mountain* [2002] gradually “synch up”) to create a single (mostly) linear narrative. Van Sant uses continuity editing techniques (reactions shots, eye-line matching, reverse shots, dead-spot cutting) to quicken the pace, create suspense, and suture the viewer more tightly to the narrative.

Perhaps inevitably for an action climax, Van Sant employs Griffith-derived techniques and situations: parallel montage (John’s movements outside the school and Benny’s [Bennie Dixon] walk through the school are intercut with the killers); family reunification (John and his father); a woman paralyzed with fear (Acadia); siege-confinement (the GSA students struggle to escape the building, Alex traps Nathan and Carrie in the meat locker); captivity-rescue (Benny helps Acadia out of the GSA meeting room).

But Van Sant doesn’t completely abandon temporal discontinuity. The shooting starts twice: on-screen in



Looking out from the GSA meeting room, a student receives a hit from an unseen assailant.



In the library, Alex keeps shooting, while his victims remain out of focus in the background.



In the cafeteria Alex sits and talks to Eric off-screen. The camera pans left ...

the library, then off-screen (via sound effects) in the GSA meeting (and perhaps a third time in the girls bathroom). When Benny walks up to the GSA meeting room we hear glass breaking. If this is the same window we heard broken earlier, then the film has jogged back slightly in time again.

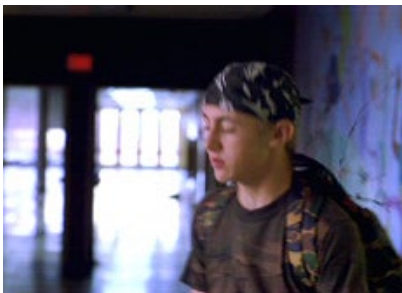
The shootings, as I suggested before, are also depicted in an untraditional manner. Gunplay in movies is usually depicted in rapid, precise editing between the shooter and his target. The relationship between action and reaction is very clear. Van Sant adheres to this convention in the shootings of Michelle, Mr. Lewis, and Benny, where assailant and victim are linked via editing or framing. But other shootings are photographed like the rest of the movie: in single takes. We see either a shooter or a victim but not in the same shot or even sequentially.

When Alex and Eric fire their new gun in Alex's garage, the camera shows them firing screen left at an off-screen target. The camera then pans left to a stack of firewood splintering from bullets while the shooter is now excluded from the shot. As with the spitball throwers we don't see assailant and target in the same shot. A boy in the GSA discussion group goes into the hall to see what the commotion is all about. He is felled by a bullet but the shooter is off screen. When the rampage shifts to the cafeteria we enter the scene with several people (including one of the kitchen workers observed earlier) already dead—the entire scene has occurred off screen. The camera tracks with Alex in close-up as he strides through the library shooting students. Van Sant doesn't intercut Alex shooting and the students running. We see panicked students in soft focus fleeing and falling in the background beyond Alex. In a clever reversal of the close-up of Michelle in the locker room, this shot suggests that Alex's social isolation and self-absorption are the preconditions of his heartless cruelty—the loner as victimizer rather than victim. The fuzzy blobs that ridiculed Michelle are now the dehumanized objects of Alex's moral myopia.

When Alex shoots Eric, Alex is completely off screen and blood explodes out of Eric's back. We're just as surprised as he is. Compare this to a similar scene of betrayal in Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986) in which Barnes (Tom Berenger) shoots fellow soldier Elias (Willem Dafoe). Intercutting carefully describes the



... and the shot continues, as Eric looks screen left and talks to Alex off-screen, when suddenly ...



... Eric is shot without warning. The shot continues as ...



... Alex walks through the same frame previously occupied by Eric.

evolution of the encounter and each character's change of expression—especially Elias' transition from relief at what he assumes is his rescue to dismay when Barnes aims his gun at him. What Alex might be thinking or feeling when he kills Eric is withheld from us. Barnes' motivation for killing Elias has already been established. Nothing equivalent is established between Alex and Eric and we can only guess at Alex's motivation.

In the last shot of the narrative proper Alex recites “eenie, meenie, minee, moe...” as he swivels his gun between the terrified Nathan and Carrie. This rhyme is a randomization device used by children, a way of landing the finger of fate on a person by means of chance. Or rather, a psuedo-randomization device. As every child knows, you can alter the phrasing of this rhyme to produce any outcome you want. Alex cruelly pretends Nathan and Carrie's respective fates are up to chance, but this whole situation is entirely his choice (It may also be a reference to Quentin Tarantino, who used this rhyme in his scripts for *Pulp Fiction* and *Natural Born Killers* [1994], films which specialize in “cool-looking” violence)

So was this tragedy a result of chance or choice? Accident or fate? Eric provides his own answer as he lectures the terrified principal in dialogue seemingly borrowed from the TV movie *Helter Skelter* (1976): “You know there's others like us out there, too. And they *will* kill you if you *fuck* with them like you did me and Jerry” (why Eric says “Jerry” instead of “Alex” is unclear, other than as a reference to *Gerry*). In other words, it was both fate and chance. It didn't have to be Alex and Eric at Watt High School (chance) but it did have to happen somewhere, sometime (fate). Eric seems to be promising an uprising on the scale of *The Warriors*. Is that boastful nonsense or is he right? Since reports of teens hoarding weapons and making threats continue to this day, he seems terribly right.

The final shots of the film—vast cloudscape behind the end credits—ask us to consider the story within a larger cinematic and mythic context. Time-lapse shots of skies and landscapes have been a part of Van Sant's filmmaking practice since his teen years (Parish 15). In *Drugstore Cowboy* high-speed cloud formations accompany the protagonist's drug euphoria. In *My Own Private Idaho* landscape shots (both high- and regular-speed) represent the dream state of the

narcoleptic protagonist, Mike Waters (River Phoenix). In *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1993) the Fordian western landscape—a crucible for American frontier values—is used for multicultural rebellion and sentiment. In *Gerry* the stark but beautiful landscape seems to punish its two lost, wandering protagonists for their complacency, casual tourism, and removal from nature. In all of these films humans seem not quite capable of living up to the promise of the wilderness (a theme Van Sant shares with Terrence Malick).

While the use of landscape in these films is fairly clear, the role of the skyscapes in *Elephant* is more ambiguous. From whose point of view do these shots originate? Do these low angle shots implicitly respond to Michelle gazing up dreamily at the sky while on the athletic field? Are they adjacent to the school (as the opening titles shot seems to be) or could they be anywhere? Like the dreams of Mike Waters, are these Eric and Alex's dream of another world, the heaven they hope to ascend to but probably haven't? Are these the clouds Holly (Sissy Spacek) stares at in the last scene of *Badlands*? (1973, another movie about opaque killers). Or are these the “spacious skies” (*Idaho* features a sardonic, country-muzak version of “America, the Beautiful”) of a vast, prosperous nation living in a self-willed dream, its head in the clouds, in which “others like us” go about unrecognized until it is too late?



A cloudscape from the end credits: *Elephant* has made nature itself unreliable.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The relatable real: docudrama, ethics, and *Saving Jessica Lynch*

by [Steve Lipkin](#)



Docudrama presents actual people and events within a narrative structured by fiction film's codes and conventions.



Saving Jessica Lynch encompasses both a war story....

On Sunday night, November 9, 2003, NBC premiered *Saving Jessica Lynch* (P. Markle). As a movie-of-the-week docudrama, *Saving Jessica Lynch* re-creates what had been one of the major and more controversial news events of the then weeks-old war in Iraq. Lynch's unit, the 507th Maintenance Company, consisting of a long convoy of supply trucks and repair vehicles, made a series of wrong turns and attempted to go through, rather than around, the city of Nasiriyah. The group was ambushed, with initially sixteen of its members listed as "missing." Several appeared shortly afterward on television as prisoners of war.

Lynch, one of the seriously wounded survivors, was taken to an Iraqi hospital. When U.S. forces extracted Lynch from the hospital initial news coverage embraced United States officials' eagerness to headline the heroism of Lynch's resistance to capture, and the apparently daring raid that retrieved her. Jessica Lynch became a news commodity, not only as Operation Iraqi Freedom's first rescued POW, but also as a celebrity. Within weeks she sold her life rights for the production of a movie-of-the-week based on her exploits. *Hustler* publisher Larry Flynt announced he had acquired nude pictures of Lynch. Finally, in the fall of 2003 Lynch's book (*I Am A Soldier, Too: The Jessica Lynch Story*)[[1](#)] and NBC's docudrama were offered to the public simultaneously. Numerous web sites appeared examining every facet of Lynch's life, including her wounds, her recuperation, and her wedding plans.[[2](#)]

Jessica Lynch remains, perhaps in every sense of the word, one of the more constructed emblems of the Bush administration's post-September 11 conflict of



... and a biopic about Lynch's coming from a small town in West Virginia.



Saving Jessica Lynch re-creates the video....



... that the army shot and...

culture: “Jessica Lynch” connotes U.S. innocence used by the forces at war in this conflict, somehow emerging through strength of spirit to resume a normal life as a normal, small-town American. The movie-of-the-week docudrama version of the errors that put Lynch’s convoy in the line of fire, and Lynch’s subsequent capture and rescue aired a mere seven months after the events it depicts. The film’s broadcast, coinciding with the release and promotion of Lynch’s story in print, precipitated revisiting charges about this story raised in the media, namely that the United States government had exploited as a propaganda opportunity what had happened to Lynch, as well as any heroism in her service to her country.

Saving Jessica Lynch draws on two sources for its re-creation of its story, Lynch’s memories, and the account offered by Iraqi lawyer Mohammed al-Rehaief of his efforts to provide the U.S. military the information it needed to extract Lynch from the Iraqi hospital where she was being held.

True to its form as a movie-of-the-week docudrama, the film narrates the material it documents (it is, as opening credits reminds us, “based on a true story”) through the codes and conventions of the classic Hollywood narrative film. It draws on the strategies characteristic of melodrama, and in particular those of stories about victims and the trials they face. The sense of victimization in the film is, however, a two-edged sword.

In a key moment, as Lynch’s convoy has been decimated, victorious fedayeen shoot the dead, dying, and wounded U.S. soldiers. We see Lynch’s body, pulled from the wreckage of a Humvee, sprawled helpless and broken on the street. The fedayeen leader notices that she is conscious, moves closer to her, leans down to her, and says, “Welcome to my country.” The scene shows the fedayeen as guerilla fighters, ruthlessly using their streets against an inadequately prepared, out-of-place U.S. force incapable of effectively defending itself. The scene raises the question: What has victimized Lynch and the others?

Certainly “embedded” news coverage of the war in Iraq has provided an iconography both of what we believe that country at war looks like, as well as of its U.S. combatants, and the film, shot on location in Texas, adheres faithfully to that “look.” There is a further blending in *Saving Jessica Lynch* of biopic and war



allowed broadcast after her rescue.



Here an enacted image of Lynch in pain. The fiction can root itself in the already well known army video and expand on it. Docudrama “models” a story taken from contemporary experience by imaginatively developing its emotional aspects. Depicted in this film is a hero’s pain and suffering, but also a woman’s victimization.



The fiction also draws upon the images and narrative moves of the war film genre, here showing a rocket in flight. Docudrama

story. We see the following kinds of scenes:

- Lynch as small-town girl (flashbacks show us her pre-war life in West Virginia)
- Lynch as innocent victim/soldier
- two different rescue stories
 - al-Rehaief’s story, showing how he assumes great risk to tell the U.S. army where Lynch is
 - the story of the army’s rescue based on his information
- the larger war story itself.

What is at stake, ethically, in the broadcast market’s efforts to thrust Jessica Lynch into the culture of war? British theatre historian Derek Paget states in his fifth “Modest Proposal” about docudrama, that

“To theatricalize public occurrence is to engage in a mode of aesthetic and ethical inquiry.”^[3]

Paget’s proposition identifies what is tantamount to an ethical imperative. In the case of the works presented as movie-of-the-week (MOW) docudramas on U.S. television, an ethical imperative suggests that these are stories that should be told, and told this way. The proposition invites us to confront the purposes and effects of docudrama. Why might one particular story be exemplary? What results when a story is offered to the world as itself “based on a true story”?

What docudramas are and what they do create at least three fundamental arenas of ethical consideration that I will examine below:

It is first necessary to view television MOW docudramas as “documents.” Representing actual people, places, and events traditionally has been the work of documentary film. Docudramas, in part, share this work as a function of their storytelling. Here their proximity to actuality shapes the site of the ethical debate that arises.

Second, docudramas are also persuasive appeals. The

fictionalizes elements of contemporary experience so as to allow the audience to *feel* what are otherwise undocumented aspects of current events and social problems.

warranting strategies they incorporate invite examining their means of ethical persuasion. “Warrants” through a basis in common sense and logic, provide the means to allow arguments to reason from evidence to the conclusions they advocate.

Finally, U.S. movie-of-the-week docudramas function as products, produced because they are “rootable” (tied to known events), “relatable” (appealing to the core of the TV audience), and “promotable” (easy for networks to sell).

Ethical concerns grow out of the appropriateness of commodifying life stories, as well as the process of legitimizing legal, political, social, and moral issues that become viewed through the prism of commodification. In what ways does selling *Saving Jessica Lynch* as a movie-of-the-week docudrama serve the interests of its network, of viewers, of voters, of the Pentagon, the Bush administration, not to mention Jessica Lynch herself? NBC’s November, 2003 broadcast of *Saving Jessica Lynch* will, as a MOW and as an event (broadcast the Sunday night before Veterans Day; broadcast at the outset of a week of talk show appearances by Lynch to plug her book) serve as a case study to illuminate these perspectives and to suggest that the work allows for varied readings of what it advocates.

[Continued: *Saving Jessica Lynch* as document](#)

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Originally part of a large supply convey, Lynch's 507th Maintenance Company noncombat unit is comprised of cooks, mechanics, and clerks. Her group falls behind and tries to retrace its route. Note the visual prominence of the U.S. flag, which often appears in the film, heavily laden with connotations for U.S. television viewers.



Shots like this have a certain "realism" as they show the harsh terrain, but the images also narratively suggest the unit's potentially dangerous isolation and precarious situation.

Arena 1:

Saving Jessica Lynch as document

Docudramas argue initially that we need to receive them as a mixture of presentational modes. Docudramas indicate their roots in actuality when they are "based on" or "inspired by" "true stories." The "narrative of a narrative" that the assertion presents us with, that the story we're about to see is itself "based on a true story," signals clearly that the work before us is an adaptation, often of a well-known prior text or a publicly-known event that has been widely reported. The story *Saving Jessica Lynch* tells us began when the news media heavily publicized Lynch's capture and subsequent extraction from an Iraqi hospital in late March and early April, 2003. (The reader can trace the chronological development of news stories about Jessica Lynch, through Internet sources cited in the footnotes, to recall the public "text" around her, and how her story's connotations shifted over time.)

Initial news stories about the attack on Lynch's convoy, her capture, and her rescue emphasized armed resistance. For example, BBC news noted that:

"There is as yet no clear picture of the circumstances of her capture, but intelligence suggests Private Lynch fought a heroic battle,' U.S. officials told the *Washington Post* newspaper. 'Ambushed by Iraqi forces, she continued firing back even after she had already been hit multiple times herself and had seen several other soldiers in her unit die around her,' one official told the paper. 'She was fighting to the death,' the official said. 'She did not want to be taken alive.'"^[4]

The same theme of armed resistance appeared in the first reports of Lynch's rescue:

"The troops fought their way into the hospital and whisked Lynch away on a

stretcher, fighting their way out.”[5]

By mid-May, the BBC challenged the claims of the original coverage as

“one of the most stunning pieces of news management yet conceived.”[6]

For a time, the BBC pushed hard the argument that the Pentagon had “wagged the dog” in its readiness to “produce” the Jessica Lynch story as an episode in a war narrative it could shape. The BBC placed the packaging of the video of the rescue from the hospital in the context of an earlier collaboration of the Pentagon with producer/director Jerry Bruckheimer. This was a reality TV show based on a series of stories about soldiers in Afghanistan, “Profiles From the Front Line.”[7] Bruckheimer two years previously had produced *Black Hawk Down* (R. Scott, 2001).

NBC’s eventual adaptation limits its narrative scope to re-creating what happened to Lynch, rather than widening its view to encompass any analysis or assessment of the accompanying news coverage, the claims about the “staged” elements of the rescue, and the controversies these generated, as a documentary might about the same subject.

Even more, in this case we clearly are only partly in the realm of truth claims made by documentary, because movie-of-the-week docudramas indicate to their audiences the need to receive them as entertainment products. Docudramas enter the market place as feature films and movie-of-the-week presentations and narrate their actual material through the codes and conventions of drama and melodrama. What results is a fusion of documentary and narrative modes of presentation, and in this case in particular, a blending of the journalistic (news stories), the personal (Lynch’s and al-Rehaief’s stories), and Hollywood, movie-of-the-week stylization.

Through their basis in true stories, docudramas claim that what we are about to see on screen happened much like what transpired in actuality. The prior text(s) that provides the basis for the docudrama story will motivate the narrative’s resemblances to its referents. Consequently narrative representation re-creates as closely as possible what we know about the actuality it re-presents. In semiotic terms, docudrama’s



Even state-of-the-art GPS technology cannot get Lynch’s convey where it belongs...



... as it approaches its fateful wrong turn ...



... into the city of Nasiriyah.



As the group of vehicles enters the city, the film presents a series of shots of the inhabitants ...



that reveals the clash of two cultures.



In these images, the social environment is presented as “inscrutably” or exotically foreign and the mindset of the inhabitants as masked, unreadable.



Here the framing of the long shot suggests a sniper's POV.

hybridity depends upon indexical icons, re-creations that bear close, motivated resemblances to the real.^[8] Docudrama's rhetorical integrity, its validity as argument, depends entirely then on the extent to which it can substantiate the proximity it claims to its subject matter.

Arena 2: Saving Jessica Lynch as persuasive argument

Proximity strategies in docudrama provide rhetorical warrants, allowing the films to make claims about their subjects based on the data, the documentary subject matter, they re-create.^[9] Docudramatic rhetoric uses several kinds of warrants to connect its presentation of its subjects to the claims the narratives forward.^[10] Most predominantly, works construct models of the people, places, and events that make up their stories. Models bear directly motivated resemblances to their subject. Modeling warrants are as evident in the casting of principal parts as they are in the re-creation of key locations and the iconography of events. In this instance NBC re-created the images of Jessica Lynch that would be highly familiar to the audience for the work, including the service portrait that had appeared on news magazine covers, and the wire-service frame grab of Lynch on a cot being removed from the Iraqi hospital.

The proximity strategies docudramas employ both influence and warrant the arguments the films would forward about their subjects. With some docudramas, critics raise ethical red flags when the degree of proximity becomes questionable. While the controversies surrounding works such as *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991), *Mississippi Burning* (Alan Parker, 1988), and *The People vs. Larry Flynt* (Milos Forman, 1996) have been notorious because critics have questioned the closeness of their re-creations to the known actuality they reference, there have also been concerns raised on the same basis about *The Insider* (Michael Mann, 1999), *The Hurricane* (Norman Jewison, 1999), and *A Beautiful Mind* (Ron Howard, 2001).^[11]

In this case CBS dropped initial plans for a Lynch docudrama because of the controversy surrounding the facts of both capture and rescue. NBC's eventual production avoided the errors of early April's news coverage, avoided the speculative re-creation of the disputed, abusive treatment Lynch may or may not

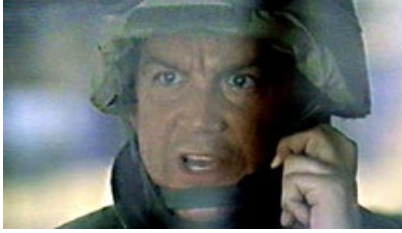


have received between capture and hospital internment, and split its viewpoint between Lynch's conscious memory, and the account of her rescue marketed by Mohammed al-Rehaief, the Iraqi lawyer who directed the U.S. army to Lynch's hospital room.

[Continued: *Saving Jessica Lynch* as product](#)

"This is all wrong."

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Arena 3:

Saving Jessica Lynch as product



Lynch's convey is trapped as...



the feydayeen block the street with a schoolbus and...



... ambush Lynch's unit.

Movie-of-the-week docudrama has been a staple of telefilm production since the 1980s. ABC, CBS and NBC invested in docudrama production through the 1990s in an effort to counter the loss of their audience to cable. What television executives, producers and writers have termed the “rootable,” “relatable,” and “promotable” qualities of docudrama properties have made the production of movies based on true stories a key strategy during sweeps periods for attracting and retaining audience. Due to its “rootable” material—the widely known, the frequently current, and the often notorious nature of its subject matter—docudrama can be convenient to promote. The desire for “relatable” material has led to narrower choices of subject matter. In marketing terms “relatability” tends to put white, middle-class, female central characters in some form of jeopardy. The preference for stories “based on” or “inspired by” actual events—often with female central characters—reflects directly the ongoing effort by both network and cable to win, recapture and maintain what they define as the core of their target audience, women between the ages of 18 and 49. In these terms, *Saving Jessica Lynch* represents an ideal MOW docudrama property.

To put *Saving Jessica Lynch* in context, a sampling of concurrent sweeps period programming illustrates the range of central characters, actual circumstances and arguments advocated in MOW docudramatic practice. During the May 2003 sweeps, just weeks after the invasion of Iraq began, U.S. networks programmed no less than seven MOW docudramas, including a two-night miniseries, *Hitler: The Rise of Evil*. Of the seven titles, three centered on war or war-related stories (*Hitler*; *Out of the Ashes*; and *Daughter from Da Nang*). Three others gave the “inside” stories of famous subjects (*Lucy*; *Behind the Camera: 3's Company*, *The Unauthorized Story*; *Martha Inc.*) Two of the MOW docudramas coat-



tailed prominent news events (*Martha Inc.*; *Ice Bound*). This typology has been typical of network MOW production for the last decade. The sampling's emphasis on war subjects has been characteristic of sweeps docudrama programming since 2000.[12]



Lynch's rifle jams. She is fearful and bewildered.

It should not be surprising that as rootable, relatable, and promotable products, MOW docudramas of the last several years should turn to war-related topics and visions of rescuing Americans and U.S. interests.[13] The September 11 terrorist attacks reactivated a Pearl Harbor mindset in the United States. Not surprisingly then, war docudrama suits the culture of conflict encouraged by the Bush administration subsequently. *Saving Jessica Lynch* argues not only that in the post-9/11 world we necessarily see rescuers (and the rescued) as heroes, but it also begs for the nobility of a war that is necessary to rescue Americans, U.S. interests, and ultimately, some sense of our identity as Americans.



The unit's evasive action and armed resistance ends when Lynch's Humvee rear-ends the truck in front of it.

This, however, is one view. Consider another. Jessica Lynch is "rescued" not simply from a desperate, life-threatening combat situation, but also from an erroneous national policy. Early in the film we see Lynch's convoy approaching, and then entering the city of Nasiriyah. Scenes just before this have recreated the fateful, erroneous decisions to make the wrong turns that have brought the convoy to this juncture. As the heavy trucks and Humvees slowly make their way through the streets the surprised townspeople watch its progress. The U.S. soldiers nervously study the Iraqis in return. The mutual apprehension and the point of view structure build systematically, culminating in an exchange of glances between Lynch and an Iraqi man in a pick-up truck that begins to shadow the convoy. In slow motion, the man opens a cell phone and begins to speak. The convoy unsuccessfully attempts to turn around and retreat, but a school bus is pushed across the street, blocking their escape.



Feyadeen shoot wounded U.S. soldiers, but...

The film shows U.S. troops being attacked. Recreating the attack on Jessica Lynch's convoy also necessitates showing U.S. troops in a place they do not belong. They are, quite simply, invaders who are being attacked. Is the action then self-defense, or is it aggression? *Saving Jessica Lynch* invites—and warrants—divergent readings, interpretations of what it shows that both support and criticize the presence



... they remove Lynch from the wreckage and take her to the hospital. The film's narrative switches from depicting Lynch's experiences to those of Mohammed al-Rehaief, whose book about this event shaped the script.



Here al-Rehaief turns his daughter's head from the sight of a woman's corpse being dragged through the streets. Later he directs U.S. rescuers to Lynch, held in the hospital where his wife is a nurse. He says seeing Lynch interrogated "cuts [his] heart." His wife opposes his risking his family for Lynch. He says he does so *for his daughter*, who on cue walks into the room.

of the U.S. army in Iraq. In both views, as it offers persuasive argument the film re-creates events to provide necessary data. And it uses its re-creation of physical damage to actual individuals to warrant larger arguments about national policy and national identity.

Pentagon control over images of the war underlines the necessity of re-creating events. As much as "Operation Iraqi Freedom" has been given air time in the media, that effort to control how the war appears has been evident from the outset in "embedded" news reporting, and through the kinds of images the Pentagon itself generates ("Mission Accomplished") or restricts. The salience of that control is perhaps most evident when it is breached—when Al-Jazeera becomes the outlet for airing footage no one else has shown, when photos of flag-draped coffins do appear in the media, and when photos of prisoners at Abu Ghraib reach the light of day.

As Americans we are, *Saving Jessica Lynch* would argue, both our mistakes and our efforts to correct them. Other recent war docudramas such as *Black Hawk Down* (R. Scott, 2001) and *We Were Soldiers* (R. Wallace, 2001) raise the same questions, and similarly define national identity through their narratives of necessary rescue. At bottom, these are all stories of the need to rescue who and what we are as a country, a need precipitated by the decision—and the pressure—to go war.

Should this story be told, and told this way? The selling of Jessica Lynch contributes yet another means of keeping George Bush's war in Iraq at the forefront of public debate. While marketed to sell heroism, this docudramatic re-creation also invites the argument that both Americans and Iraqis are victims of the questionable competence of leadership.^[14] As a cultural document, *Saving Jessica Lynch* ignores the April news ballyhoo the U.S. government welcomed originally with its erroneous reports lauding heroism under fire. Lynch's subsequent immersion in celebrity in November, 2003—her efforts in interviews and television talk shows to correct the record on her own actions notwithstanding^[15]—perpetuates a sense of U.S. victimization and rationalized retaliation that has propelled Bush administration foreign and domestic policies since 9/11. Lynch herself remains a



convenient emblem of violated innocence.

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An international media event: U.S. forces stage a dramatic rescue for the camera. Later the BBC denounces the army's video, saying the rescue team knew the fedayeen already left. The film's narrative keeps Lynch physically imperiled up to the point of rescue, but it accurately does not depict any kind of final shoot-out.



The film's rescue: Note the composition, emphasizing the U.S. flag, the soldier's strong arm, the angle down on the blonde victimized woman.

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8. See Steven N. Lipkin, *Real Emotional Logic: Film and Television Docudrama as Persuasive Practice* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002): 150 (note 4).
9. Lipkin 149 n. 4.
10. See Lipkin: 13; 23-27. Docudramas also will sequence the real and what it must re-create, that is, alternate between re-created and actual footage, so that the modeled material benefits from its literal closeness to documentary imagery. The interviews with Easy Company veterans that open each episode of *Band of Brothers* set up this strategy. For better or worse, Oliver Stone used sequencing throughout *JFK* as a means to augment the authenticity of the claims the film would forward. Another warranting strategy, interaction, places actual and re-created elements within the mise en scene, so that real-life principals move through scenes with actors (the real Jim Garrison in

JFK), or actors move through the actual locations where the re-created events originally occurred (the Illinois State Penitentiary in *Call Northside 777*; the town hall with its memorial wall in *Perfect Storm*).

11. On *The Insider*, see

http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1999/11/110506.html.

On *A Beautiful Mind*, see *The New York Times* 21 Dec. 2002: "From Math to Madness, and Back." On *The Hurricane*, see

http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/2000/01/010705.html.

12. Other war-related works of note aired in the three-year period since May 2000 include: *Submerged*; *Haven*; *Nuremberg*; *Uprising*; *Gathering Storm*; *One Night in Baghdad*; *Daughter from Da Nang*; *Out of the Ashes*; and *Band of Brothers*.

13. During the Clinton administration the U.S. public viewed the controlled effectiveness of its military in Bosnia in the face of the holocaust-like ethnic cleansing there and consequent need for war crimes tribunals. The debacle in Mogadishu, Somalia in 1993 underlined the impotence of the U.S. army, highlighted by images of the dragging of the corpse of an American GI through the streets.

14. In the first half of 2004 news coverage of the war in Iraq continued to attempt to grapple with the interrelation of victims, images of U.S. women in the military, and the repercussions of questionable leadership. Incidents of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib brought to the world's attention the countless replays of photographs of Private Lyndie England "handling" Iraqi prisoners, leading to her court martial. England's (and others') defense, that they were following the dictates of army command structure, immediately brought attention to (and the replacement of) General Janis Karpinski, who had been in charge of the prison when the abuses occurred. Stories (and photographs) of Lynch as her hearings progressed in August, 2004 consistently refer to her advanced pregnancy, positioning England as both perpetrator and victim in this chapter of the war.

15. See "Jessica Lynch Tells Her Story," *Today/MSNBC News*, November 12, 2003,

<http://msnbc.msn.com/id/3475980/>

for a transcript of her interview with Katie Couric.

(A search on "Jessica Lynch" at msnbc.msn.com will bring up mainstream news stories that trace the trajectory of how this story became publicized in the United States.)

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Michael Moore and *Fahrenheit 9/11*

by Nicole Laskowski



“Was it all just a dream?”
Moore asks in voice over at
the beginning of *Fahrenheit*
9/11, as he reminisces
about the 2000 presidential
elections.



September 11th, 2001. The
day that changed the
United States.



Was it all just a dream? It’s Oscar night 2003, just four days after the United States launched its second war against Iraq. There’s Michael Moore looking dapper, dressed not in his usual jeans and baseball cap, but in a tuxedo. When *Bowling for Columbine* is announced as the winner for best documentary, the audience gives Moore a standing ovation. And then he sidles up to the microphone and speaks the words that begin Moore’s latest controversy.

“I’ve invited my fellow documentary nominees on stage with us. They are here in solidarity with me because we like nonfiction. We like nonfiction and we live in fictitious times. We live in a time when we have fictitious election results that elect a fictitious president. We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons, whether it is the fiction of duct tape or the fiction of orange alerts. We are against this war, Mr. Bush. Shame on you, Mr. Bush. Shame on you. And any time that you have the Pope and the Dixie Chicks against you, your time is up.” (Michael Moore)[\[1\]](#)

Moore’s speech was cut short, the music began to swell and his microphone receded into the floor.

“Most of the Hollywood audience smiled and applauded, but stagehands, who were close to the microphones booed loudly enough, making it appear to a television listener that Moore’s criticism of President Bush was not well received.”[\[1\]](#)

Moore as the everyman promises he will tell the other story, the one not covered by mainstream media.



Moore shows several sources who claim Gore should have won the election.



Two members from the House of Representatives take turns at the podium as Gore presides over the election matter.



Moore discovered that no Congressperson read the

But Moore didn't stop there. He followed up this statement with his most sophisticated, most controversial film *Fahrenheit 9/11* starring George W. Bush as the bad guy.

Because of this film, Moore has been called "a commonsense man," "an American Everyman," "a merry left-winged prankster" by the more liberal media; someone who "validates cinema." "It gives this country permission to talk about things this administration doesn't want us to talk about," a viewer said. [\[2\]](#) "Here comes *Fahrenheit 9/11* like a breath of fresh air. Like a release," a 9/11 survivor said. [\[2\]](#)

But he has also been called "a domestic enemy," "reckless," "unpatriotic," "a bully," "loudmouthed," "un-American" by the more conservative press. The *New York Times* ran a op-ed column written by David Brooks that spliced together some of the comments Moore had been making in other countries: "You're stuck with being connected to this country of mine, which is known for bringing sadness and misery to places around the globe," Moore said in Cambridge. [\[3\]](#)

Individuals have taken time to comb through the film and find as many "lies" as possible. (Dave Kopel through the Independence Institute—a "nonpartisan research organization"—claims to have found 59. [\[4\]](#)) Weblogs exist watching and commenting on Moore's every move.

Before the film could be released to an U.S. audience, a release shrouded in controversy itself when at the last minute Disney, the original distributor, backed out of the deal, Moore took it to Cannes where he won the Palme d'Or, the highest prize given to a film and a distinction that has not been bestowed upon a documentary since 1956.

"When I was on stage with Michael Moore," said Quentin Tarantino, the 2004 Cannes Film Festival Jury President, "I just whispered in his ear, and I just said 'I just want you to know it was not because of the politics that you won this award. It was because it was the best film that we saw.'" [\[5\]](#)

A polemical editorial essay

Fahrenheit 9/11, largely a polemic about George W. Bush and his administration, is the *other* story, the one not aggressively followed up by America's

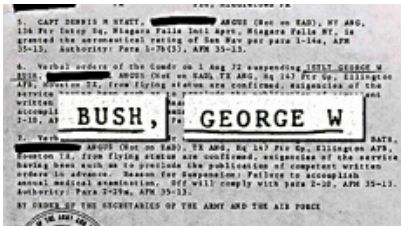
Patriot Act before it was passed. So he rents an ice cream truck and reads it to Congress.



During the opening credits, Colin Powell prepares for his on-camera role as Secretary of State.



Bush also prepares to play his role. The images of him in this sequence are grainier and more heavily manipulated.



The music changes to a guitar riff from Eric Clapton's song "Cocaine," reminding Moore's

mainstreamed media. Moore uses the documentary to create a filmic version of an editorial essay. He looks over the past four years and questions much of the work President Bush has done. He questions the 2000 election results; Bush's response to the attacks on September 11th; the relations between the President, Saudi Arabia and the bin Laden family; the bombing of Afghanistan; the war on Iraq; the Patriot Act.

This film is classic Michael Moore. There's music to fit the mood, there are clips from those old classic films to help fill in the gaps, there are quips and jokes and interviews. And there's Michael Moore commentating above it all; or there he is driving an ice cream truck around the Capitol Building reading the U.S. Patriot Act through the megaphone, or there he is waiting to bump into members of Congress to enlist their sons or daughters in the war on Iraq, or there he is talking to teenagers from Flint, Michigan (his hometown) who are thinking of enlisting because, finally, this may be a way out of poverty and a way out of Flint.

"Moore has done something the left rarely does. He's made political criticism entertaining. And as polls show, Generation X and Y Americans get their news increasingly from entertainment shows—the hip irony of political jokes told on *The Late Show* with David Letterman and *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart."[\[6\]](#)

But through all of the joking, through all of the teasing, Moore does have a message. Namely that since George W. Bush has taken office, the United States has been lied to, kept in the dark, manipulated, robbed and left feeling powerless and scared.

We have entered Orwellian and Bradburian times, Moore claims. Times when society feels disconnected from its elected officials, and in turn, those elected officials keep society ignorant to what's really going on. According to Moore's film, the President of the United States and all of his cabinet continue to present a façade of democracy, but the reality behind that façade is something less than democratic—the wealthy have the power and ability to steer this country in whatever direction their agenda dictates.

The most telling images in the film of this administration's secrecy, of their manipulation, comes very early on when viewers are shown footage of several cabinet members and the national security

audience of a younger,
more experimental Bush.



John Ashcroft, the man
behind the U.S. Patriot Act,
sings, “Let the mighty eagle
soar,” from a song of his
own composition.

advisor in some off-camera moments. The viewers are allowed to see someone preening over Bush’s hair before the President speaks to the U.S. public; Paul Wolfowitz, the advisor to the Secretary of Defense, spitting on a comb and brushing it through his hair; John Ashcroft, Bush’s former Attorney General, telling the camera to “make me look young;” Condoleezza Rice, the National Security Advisor, having foundation applied; Dick Cheney, the Vice-President, having his face brushed with powder.

Although Moore never outright reveals the intent behind these images, the message seems obvious. Here we are in the beginning of a film called *Fahrenheit 9/11* watching the major characters, the actors if you will, preparing to play their roles as representatives of U.S. democracy and capitalism.

But upon second glance, Moore has also given his perspective on how this administration functions. Interestingly, the images of Bush in this sequence are treated differently. Unlike any one else who appears within the opening credits, the images of Bush are grainy, and Moore bounces back and forth between showing Bush in real time and slow motion. These techniques force Bush to seem even more diluted, distant and unreal. Also, Bush appears to be speaking at certain times, but he is not given a voice. On the other hand, when either Rumsfeld or Ashcroft appears, they have a voice even if what they are saying is “make me look young.” Through this sequence, Moore sets up a dichotomy between the people behind the curtain who control governmental decisions and their wizard or front man.

This can be juxtaposed with Moore himself who is also a character in this film. Moore’s presence has become one of his signatures in all of his films where he acts much of the time as a narrator and also as comic relief. However, Moore as a character is not treated in the same way as Rice, Bush and his cabinet. Nowhere do we see Moore preparing to be the narrator for this film; nowhere is he combing his hair for the camera or having his make-up applied. He doesn’t need make-up because, Moore seems to be saying, he doesn’t act a role. He is who he is—the one who will reveal the secrecy and the hidden lies, the one who, unlike this country’s news media, will ask the hard questions. We can trust in Michael Moore.

But can we?

While Moore has never hidden his politics, both his agenda and methodology seem questionable from time to time. Moore clearly aligns himself with the average American through his appearance and language, which makes him both easy to like and easy to believe. Again, unlike the Bush Administration, Moore is the real person in this film—like the soldiers in Iraq and the widows mourning over September 11th, and the mothers weeping at the loss of their sons and daughters from the war. Yet, through all of the troubling elements of rigged elections or of war, Moore always comes back to humor as if entertaining his viewers holds as much importance as investigating what's really going on. It is this oscillation between silliness and seriousness that creates confusion.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Montage to create meaning



The beginning of a montage sequence that depicts an oxymoronic moment: “The targeting capabilities and the care that goes into targeting...” says Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.



The montage immediately cuts in this image...

Throughout much of the film, Moore uses the technique of montage to create meaning. In some sequences, the montage works by splicing several images or scenes back to back to allow the audience to discover their connection. For example, when Moore explores the Patriot Act and Homeland Security, he provides three vignettes to demonstrate how extreme the Patriot Act has become.

In the first example, Moore meets and hangs out with a group called “Peace Fresno” that was infiltrated by the sheriff’s anti-terrorism unit. Moore uses a 50s style background music to give a sense of innocence and peacefulness. In the next example, Moore introduces Barry Rheingold, an older retired gentleman, who one day at the gym said some denigrating remarks about Bush and the war on Afghanistan. Because of these remarks, Rheingold was visited by the FBI. In the third example, Moore introduces baby Patrick Hamilton, whose mommy’s breast milk didn’t make it past security. Finally, Moore shows a scene of someone going through airport security and being allowed to carry four books of matches and two butane lighters on the plane.

“Okay, let me see if I’ve got this straight,” Moore says. “Old guys in the gym: bad. Peace groups in Fresno: bad. Breast milk: really bad. But matches and lighters on the plane, hey, no problem.”

Moore’s point is clear. The U.S. government has enacted a bill for the protection of this society, but if you have enough money, power and influence (i.e., like the cigarette industry), you don’t have to follow the rules.

Moore also uses montage sequences to provide shock value. Words are juxtaposed with images that directly contradict each other. These are Moore’s oxymoronic moments.



... and this. Rumsfeld can still be heard saying, "...is as impressive as anything anyone could see."



"The care that goes into it, the humanity that goes into it," Rumsfeld continues.



"Victory to Iraq," an older Iraqi woman finally cries out in response to the bombing of her uncle's house.



For example, Moore shows Donald Rumsfeld standing behind a White House podium during a press brief. Rumsfeld says, "The targeting capabilities and the care that goes into targeting..." Moore quickly cuts away to show an Iraqi building blown apart. Rumsfeld's voice continues and blends into another shot of a young boy writhing in pain, his right temple stitched crudely, his left temple being treated: "...is as impressive as anything anyone could see." Moore then cuts to a shot from the perspective of a scope on a machine gun shooting and killing ghostly figures that move along the horizon. "The care that goes into it, the humanity that goes into it," Rumsfeld says. And then there is a shot of an older Iraqi woman standing in ruins and yelling in hysterics. "They have no conscience," she screams. "This is our uncle's house! We're all civilians! There is no militia here."

Not only does Moore juxtapose images against Rumsfeld's words, but he also juxtaposes place. Rumsfeld stands securely behind his podium, but the elderly Iraqi woman stands in front of shambles.

Moore also uses montage to provide the punch line. At the end of this sequence with Rumsfeld, Moore blends this series of shots into a shot of Britney Spears sitting in front of a reporter, smacking her gum, a hot pink stripe rippling through the blond wig she is wearing. "Honestly, I think we should just trust our president in every decision he makes, and we should support that," she says.

On top of this, Moore blends the Iraqi woman's yelling with the sound of Spears chewing her gum. Before Spears enters the frame, before the camera cuts to her interview, the sound of gum smacking can be heard. The jump from a war zone to a teenage pop star is jarring: As the Iraqi woman's world has been destroyed, Spears sits leaning forward with a giant jeweled "B" hanging from her neck. Moore seems to include this particular scene with Spears to lighten the mood, but because of the jarring transition, Moore also seems to be chastising the Spearite age group (who seems to be his target audience) and the general ignorance of the U.S. people.

Moore often overlays sounds to link two shots together. In a crossfade, the sounds of Britany Spears chewing her gum blend with the older Iraqi woman's screams.



A classic Moorism: By enhancing a clip from an old Western, Moore adds in all of the key players in the Afghanistan bombings. Moore's commentary engages the audience with both its pop culture references and overt humor.



With the Go-Go's "Vacation" playing in the background, a montage sequence presents scenes of Bush vacationing in the first months of his Presidency.

And there are other examples. A series of shots showing Bush golfing with the Go-Go's "Vacation" playing in the background. The war on Afghanistan is edited into a Western with Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Blair wearing huge cowboy hats sitting around a camp fire. Bush's repeating the phrase "smoke him out" in reference to how U.S. forces would capture bin Laden is then juxtaposed against a scene from a Western film using the same line. How is the bombing of Afghanistan supposed to be interpreted when presented in such a fashion?

Moore's camera follows two Marine Corps recruiters through the parking lot of one of Flint's shopping centers as they work their magic. These two recruiters are seen by the camera differently from the people they are trying to recruit. When they are first introduced, swanky 70s music plays in the background adding to their image as suave, smooth talkers. The camera peers up at them making them appear larger than life. In contrast, many of the men they are trying to recruit are filmed from the side, standing on the fringes of the frame. Rarely does any potential recruit appear in the center of the frame.

"I am not trying to pretend this is some sort of... fair and balanced work of journalism," Moore told a news reporter. "I would like to see Bush removed from the White House."

Beginning with his first film *Roger & Me* (1989), Moore became a voice of the working class, an average concerned citizen (who grew up in the town he was filming about) who could do and say what others couldn't or wouldn't. Whereas the thousands of workers laid off by GM in Flint, Michigan were concerned with how to pay bills, where to live after being evicted, how to feed their families, Moore takes it upon himself to be the individual who has the time, the passion, and the obsession, to do what others are too busy to do.

Here he is donned in his baseball cap, wearing blue jeans with shirts untucked, walking around with disheveled hair. Here he is standing at the reception desk of a prestigious country club or fitness club where he stands out like a sore thumb asking to see Roger Smith, the CEO of GM at the time. He almost never gets past that point. Instead, it seems, he's always one step behind the CEO, and rarely does he even make contact with the people he wishes to question. But,



After being told that the United States was under attack on September 11th, Bush remains seated in the Florida classroom he was visiting at the time. Moore imagines what Bush might have been thinking in these moments.



Fox News first announced Bush as President in the 2000 election. Bush's first cousin who worked for Fox was the person who called the Presidency in Bush's favor.



A real victim: Rosemary

because of his style, because of his appearance, he is easily familiar. And because he is pushed aside, thrown out, marginalized, he is an everyman. He's one of us.

For example, in one episode of Moore's television series *The Awful Truth* that aired on Bravo in the late 90s, Moore confronts members of Congress who support the display of the Ten Commandments in schools. He hands Dave Weldon, a representative from Florida, a plaque with the quote: "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." Weldon claims that this is one of his favorite quotes from Scripture. When Moore segues from the quote to politics, asking Weldon about accepting money from PACs and supporting a flat tax, Weldon says these things make it easier for "the little guy" to file their income tax reports because filing can be "too complicated." Moore, always ready for debate, quickly says in response, "Do you think we're that stupid that we can't fill out our tax returns?" Moore is the little guy.

Along with aligning himself as the average American, Moore also becomes a living, breathing example of democracy (whether you agree with his views or not). Through his appearance in his films and this characterization of himself as the average American, Moore reminds his viewers that they have the responsibility and the power to act as educated, concerned citizens. Rather than sitting idly by and accepting the choices CEOs or elected politicians make, Americans have the right to question these choices completely.

Moore has carried this style into all of his other films. Rather than being the observant eye, rather than documenting life, Moore takes his viewers on a journey and asks that they trust he is leading them in a good direction. And because his persona is so outwardly flawed yet capable of putting elected officials or CEOs on the spot (something many Americans no doubt would love to do from time to time), it is easy to follow Moore.

Although Moore's persona as the little guy and his style of placing people on the spot holds a prominent position in all of his films, Moore's physical presence as the common linking device from scene to scene and as a prankster seems to be diminishing in *Fahrenheit*

Dillard, a widow from 9/11, tearfully explains why the 9/11 Commission is so important to her.

9/11. In his past films, Moore has gone after Roger Smith, the CEO of GM, and Phil Knight, the CEO of Nike, and Chareilton Heston, the president of the NRA. But in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, it is the President of the United States. Unlike his other films, Moore doesn't chase President Bush through the streets of Washington D.C. He doesn't appear at the Capitol Building waiting for some Presidential representative to escort him out. He doesn't hunt Bush down for an interview. And he doesn't appear on the screen nearly as much as he has in the past.

Instead, Moore is less physically visible in this film than in his previous films, but he is more visible (and some would say more intrusive) in his editing style. So, instead of chase scenes, we have images of Bush playing golf, fumbling over speeches, saying the most inappropriate thing at the most inappropriate times. Here is President Bush on September 11th sitting in a classroom in Florida. He learns that the United States is under attack, but he doesn't move. And here is the voice of Michael Moore wondering what the President must be thinking in these moments ("I've been hanging out with the wrong crowd." "Which one of them screwed me?"), imagining that the President is worried about himself more than about the state of the country.

"On the issue of his own relative absence in the film—in which he appears on screen perhaps one-fifth of the time he was on in *Bowling for Columbine*—save for voiceover and general editorial point of view, Moore said, "This time I was the straight man. Bush wrote all the best lines." [\[7\]](#)

Bush may have written all of the best lines, but Moore has spliced these moments together so this is all we see of the President. For example, in one scene early on in the film when Moore is taking his viewers back through the 2001 elections, Moore shows an image of the Fox News Channel and says,

"But what most people don't know was that the man in charge of the decision desk at Fox that night, the man who called it for Bush, was none other than Bush's first cousin John Ellis. How does someone like Bush get away with something like this?"

Moore cuts to a scene of Bush laughing, his shoulders shaking, and then Moore quickly cuts away and continues his narration. Moore's meaning is obvious

here. He shows Bush giggling like a county bumpkin while asking viewers how this guy managed to pull off the scandal of the year.

So, on the one hand, Moore is invested in presenting his views, and he seems particularly careful to express those views through a hip-hop, MTV-esque style. He uses montage sequences to not only create meaning, but to create his meaning. And, on the other hand Moore asks his viewers to trust that he will get to the bottom of whatever situation he is investigating to the best of his ability, that he will provide the truth in a time when journalists are not asking the hard questions, that he will show you what the powers that be don't want you to know or remember.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Melodrama and one woman's story

One of the methods Moore uses is simply talking to the U.S. public. In the first three-fourths of the film, Moore essentially allows for Bush and his cabinet to set up the story. Moore then cuts away from this political-speak by focusing in on an ordinary American. One woman mourning. One woman with a face and a voice.

When Moore begins to discuss the 9/11 Commission created to investigate the attacks on September 11th, he takes his viewers through several quick cuts to provide a backstory of the situation telling his viewers that Bush tried to block Congress's investigation. Moore cuts from this to tell his viewers that Congress did complete its own investigation, but that the White House censored 28 pages. According to Moore's source, these censored pages directly related to Saudi Arabia. When Bush is asked whether he will testify in front of the commission, Bush says he'll be happy to "visit" with them.

Moore breaks from this political swirl of news reports and presidential interviews and introduces his viewers to Rosemary Dillard who was widowed on the day of the attacks.

"I need to know what happened to him," she says. "That man was my life and I have no plan... and if I'm not doing something with this, I don't know what reason I have to live." She moves away from the camera with tears in her eyes.

Moore reminds his viewers that through all of the politics of the situation, through all of the censoring of information and the blocking of commissions, there are real people out there still reeling from this tragedy. People who are still trying to put the pieces of their lives back together. People, Moore seems to be saying, who deserve to have answers. And he presents himself as their advocate.

In the last one-third of the film, Moore allows for these



Moore deviates from humor by using the genre of melodrama to tell one mother's story. This is Lila Lipscomb.



Moore juxtaposes Lipscomb's story with the cold reality that many young men and women fighting overseas have few economic options. These two recruiters comb the parking lots of Flint's poorer neighborhoods where they usually have more success.



Moore makes one of his rare appearances in the film, dressed in his usual attire of a baseball cap and a sweatshirt. He is an American everyman.

ordinary people to have more than just a voice, more than just 20 seconds of screen time, he allows for one of them to tell her story.

Here is Lila Lipscomb. She describes her family as the backbone of America. This county was built on the backs of her people and people like hers. She talks of her supporting the armed services because the military has provided a way for her children to become independent, to find a way out of Flint, Michigan. And she is proud of her children's commitment to the United States, beaming when she talks about her daughter's service in the first Gulf War and her son's service in the current war on Iraq. We see the U.S. flag flying in her front yard, a pin of the U.S. flag attached to her lapel.



"What is wrong with George. Trying to be like his father, Bush. He got us out here for nothing whatsoever," Lipscomb reads the last letter her son sent home as it slowly brings her to tears.

At this point in the film, Moore has already given his viewers the scary sense that several of the teenagers in this town do consider heading overseas to fight in this war because this could be their chance to get out of Flint. Already he has followed two recruiters around the parking lot of some mega-shopping center to corner young men and ask them to sign up. Already he has placed a circle around the type of people attracted to the armed services: they are young, innocent and poor. This "voluntary" service is not "voluntary" to them. It is a practical way out. Lipscomb and her son become the tangible example of this.

Lipscomb's perspective, though, seems surprising in the face of all of this. But when her son Michael Pedersen dies in a helicopter crash in Iraq, Moore is there to show Lipscomb's change in attitude. She reads the last letter her son sent home, tears flooding her eyes:

"I cannot wait to get back to home and back to my life... and I'll see my first nephew soon, as soon as I get back to the States," Pedersen wrote. But this will never happen.



When Lipscomb travels to Washington DC, she confronts a woman in front of the White House about the reality of losing her son in Iraq.

Moore personalizes this war. More important, he does something that seems unMoore-like. Rather than running after the good joke, Moore deviates from his norm to entertain his viewers with a different genre—with melodrama, a genre that highlights women's struggling in a society through a narrative charged with emotion. Everything about a melodrama is created to highlight emotion, from costumes to lighting to music to set design. Like traditional melodrama, Moore films

Lipscomb in dress similar to his, in jeans and t-shirts. He shows Lipscomb in her kitchen sipping her coffee or in her front yard displaying her U.S. flag.

However, even this storyline has been manipulated for his audience. Moore admits he knew of Lipscomb only after her son had been killed in Iraq. In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* he says,

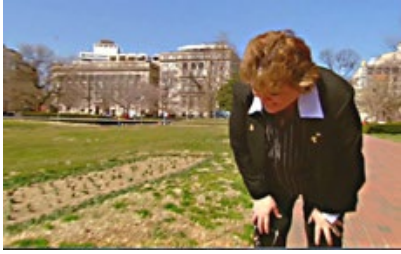
“In the first month or two after the war, I noticed that [some] soldiers had died from Flint. I said we should start calling some of [their relatives] and see if they'll talk to us.... It was a number of months after her son had died. I can get you the exact dates, but I just constructed it in such a way that you don't know he's dead until [later in the film].” [8](#)

And when Moore reveals the moment of her son's death, Moore has decided to film this with all of her children sitting around her, her husband gently placing his hand on her back as she reads Pedersen's last letter home. Moore suddenly has a narrative arc. The conflict is not simply Moore's frustration with the political situation, but Lipscomb's grief.

Rather than cutting and pasting images quickly together, when Lipscomb appears on the screen, she is given long takes. In fact, even Moore begins to appear more frequently when Lipscomb is present in the frame than at any other time. Not only is she speaking, like all of the other interviewees, but she is speaking to him. The camera also pulls in to show close-ups of Lipscomb wringing her hands when she talks about the death of her son, or of her face when the tears start falling after she has read her son's last letter home.

Moore includes this excessive emotion so that, at this point, we don't need Michael Moore voiceovers or quick cuts or funny lines because this one story speaks for itself. What viewers sometimes fail to remember is that truth and fact in film are almost nonexistent. Something captured on film has already been manipulated, sometimes staged with the filmmaker having the power to include as well as exclude quotes, people, images, angles, scenes. If film is being funneled through someone's perspective, how can it be fact (or truth for that matter)?

“[Moore's] political criticism signals



After this confrontation, Lipscomb is overcome by grief. Moore films her doubled over in tears.



Still in tears, Lipscomb stares at the White House: “I finally have a place to put all of my pain and all of my anger. And to release it.”



Moore at the Capitol building, trying to enlist Congresspeople's children in the Iraq war.



Moore returns to the beginning images of this administration preparing for their roles in this film. Here as the National Security Advisor removes her ear piece, she also signals the end of the film.

problems faced by the left more generally: marginalization, a tendency to seek the purity of confrontation rather than to work for long-term political solutions, a cynicism about the possibilities of politics today, and questionable political judgments. Moore exhibits all these weaknesses... Moore takes short-cuts when it comes to politics. He entertains, but he doesn't always do much more.[\[9\]](#)

Is this what the conservative press fears? That Moore can entertain too easily and in a time when society is thirsty for the truth, for information with no spin attached?

"It is not a documentary which seeks to present the facts truthfully," wrote Ed Koch, former mayor of New York City. "The most significant offense that movie commits is to cheapen the political debate by dehumanizing the President and presenting him as a cartoon."[\[10\]](#)

Nearing the end of the film, Moore returns to the images he started with in the opening credits. Here is Condoleezza Rice removing her earpiece. Here is John Ashcroft exiting the frame. Here is Colin Powell removing his earpiece. This acts as a trigger to the audience: We have come full circle. But Moore also seems to be implying that now is the time for this administration's charade to end.

Maybe what the conservative press really fears is the ultimate impact of Moore's tactics. Bush's Presidency was born out of controversy within a country that has felt divided by the Democrat and Republican parties. Maybe what the conservative press fears is Moore successfully targeting the 18-29 year-old population by using humor and aligning himself as the average American. Youth represents a population known to take the liberal side of political issues but a population weak in actually voting. Are they afraid that Moore will convince this age group that now is the time to cast a ballot and dethrone the Republican Party?

Now, after the 2004 presidential election has yielded George W. Bush as the winner of both the popular and the electoral vote, Moore's comments the night of the 2003 Academy Awards seem far away, and the intensely heated debate over *Fahrenheit 9/11* seems to

have fizzled out. Bush is no longer a fictitious President, he is the real President-elect.

But Moore will continue to push after controversy.

“Michael Moore met with Harvey Weinstein and Moore says they plan to start working—now—on *Fahrenheit 9/11 1/2*. ‘We want to get cameras rolling now and have it ready in two-three years,’ Moore says. ‘We want to document and commercialize it. Fifty-one percent of the American people lacked information (in this election) and we want to educate and enlighten them. They weren’t told the truth.’”[\[11\]](#)

And Michael Moore will provide that truth. Right?

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Notes

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The last word Mel and Michael

by the editors

The dismay that almost all progressives felt after the U.S. election was understandable, and it has resulted in a fair amount of critique, finger-pointing, and despair. However, the anti-war movement actually accomplished something quite remarkable: a 50-50 split in an election that was largely a referendum on the war and Bush's domestic agenda. Given the situation in the months after 9/11 with Bush ascendant, and the prospects for a total triumph in November 2004, fighting to a near draw in the presidential election is a significant accomplishment that shows what local activists involvement can do. Grass roots organizing has always been the best way to pressure the Democrats on a national level. And it was the Democrat leaders who forced the selection of Kerry. The base was emphatically not very enthusiastic and ended up stuck with an "Anybody But Bush" playing field.

Much has been written about the influence of the right, radio talk shows, and Fox News on the current political landscape. But another way to think about it is to compare the two biggest surprise film auteurs of 2004: Mel Gibson and Michael Moore. In many ways they represent the current terrain of political culture today. Both are polemicists, and ruefully, we can reflect that the United States gets the polemicists it deserves, again in a 50-50 split.

If nothing else, Michael Moore's prominence the past 24 months has been remarkable as both a political and media phenomenon. We at *Jump Cut* always been skeptical of Moore, from one of the first scenes in *Roger and Me* where Moore is trying to make the point that his falling out with the trust fund radical kids who brought him to San Francisco to edit *Mother Jones* was fine with him because the Bay Area was full of phonies. To demonstrate this, he has a San Francisco coffee house waitress give a full recitation of all the varieties of coffee drinks available. Mocking a working class woman and making her do something that is required to keep her job, in order to score points on snobs in the days before Starbucks was a national chain, wasn't funny, and left a bad taste. But despite that, and even with the polemicist's dilemma of over-simplification to make or mock a point, Moore, if unappointed, still acted as a leader who was highly effective as an antagonist of the powerful and privileged. Masterfully manipulating the publicity machine, he maxed out attention at Cannes, made Disney Corp look foolish, and hit the summer screens big time with *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

While his self-congratulatory attitude, often disorganized public-speaking delivery, and unevenly focused attacks made it hard for even his most enthusiastic supporters to stick with him all the time, the return volleys from the right were astounding. During the first couple of weeks of *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s splash, right-wing talk radio and TV overflowed with self-righteous venom, up to and including the *Savage Show*'s barely veiled call for someone to kill Moore as an unpatriotic SOB. Clearly, Moore hit a nerve in the conservative body politic. After years of the Left worrying about how to get its message out in the open, Moore has shown that a mixture of savvy PR, celebrity manipulation, and jovial comedy can cross over. His activism extended to touring throughout the election campaign to register young voters. And what he did then now provides a model of effective celebrity-based organization.

While not directly parallel, the other big filmmaker phenom of the year, Mel Gibson, can be read as also contributing to the election result. Gibson's self-financed *The Passion of the Christ* evoked an equally explosive controversy. Faithfully seen by the faithful, who block-booked seats and brought out others to this conversion narrative, the film's bloody violence registered on a profound level with viewers, creating an authentic blockbuster from a spectacle of torture. The underpinning message of *The Passion*, "He died for our sins," joins a belief system in which "we" have no responsibility to social justice. Rather, all "we" have to do is confess and take a retro ceremonial communion (in Gibson's cranky extreme right Roman Catholicism) or declare Jesus as our savior (in the Protestant evangelical and fundamentalist variants). The ideas that extremely graphic laceration, whipping, and beating make suitable film fare for primary school children and that the film is innocent of anti-Semitic portrayals mark Christian fundamentalism's willful ignorance. Yet when dealing with U.S. culture, even fervent evangelicals discover to their dismay that a rising tide of irrationality floats all boats. Now *The DaVinci Code's* runaway success continues the dialect of irrational enlightenment in the wake of *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Ring's* Frodo.

At the start of Bush's second term, we need to see the 50/50 electoral split not as a geographic blue state/red state separation (for the division exists everywhere), but as representing a deep contradiction and asking for a strategic response in relation to it. The core problem the world faces today is neoliberalism. Although often an unfamiliar term in the United States, *neoliberalism* is a common term elsewhere for the ideology and practice of contemporary transnational capitalism. As a strategic view of the world, it seeks to liberalize trade and finance, let "free" markets reign, and remove government from regulation while privatizing every sector everywhere possible. Neoliberalism's goals are reducing labor costs by exporting jobs, undermining unionization, making work flexible by outsourcing, privatization, and increasing reliance on temporary, adjunct, and limited-term labor. By reducing government spending on the social sector, especially for health and education, it claims to return money and decision making to the individual. Seeking deregulation as the means to a "perfect market," neoliberalism wants to remove the economy from social realities, produce globalized markets and flexible capital, and above all, aim for short-term profits. Concomitant with these goals is the destruction of any and all projects that depend on long-term commitments. Particularly suffering from such an abandonment are the environment and education. Given the whacky extremes of Bush policymakers, classical Marxism's observations often seem like common sense—especially the observation asserted by Lenin in *State and Revolution*, that under capitalism the state has as its basic task maintaining order among competing capitalists in order to keep the system going.

The Bush administration's agenda in Iraq has as a strategic goal establishing not democracy, but strong U.S. control in the region. The government hopes to end up with permanent military bases, control over vast oil reserves and a key geopolitical position in terms of oil transport, looking forward to a near future time when China, Japan, and the EU will expand their oil consumption. What remains to be seen is how a client state can be managed—given ethnic, religious, and regional divisions with an ongoing insurgency. Progressives should make no mistake: Iraq has a strategic importance far beyond what Vietnam represented in the 1960s. But also, when we take this long-term perspective, it is worth remembering how many long years of grassroots organizing finally resulted in tipping the balance in favor of withdrawal and ending the Vietnam war. Clearly, we face another long haul on another aggressive war, with many closely related connections to domestic and social justice issues. And we must keep both aspects in mind—the global/strategic and the domestic/immediate—as we continue to organize to challenge Bush's agenda. At its best moments, *Fahrenheit 9/11* dropped its grand conspiracies about Saudis flying away after the attack and instead turned to relate the war directly to deteriorating working-class employment.

The present political scene has its own contradictions, which force socially conscious mediamakers and activists to find new forms to express new realities. We have seen how reality TV increasingly has taken over the television landscape, with primetime programming that embodies the moral Darwinism of "you're fired!" in *The Apprentice* or the deceitful maneuvering of *Survivor*, which title itself says something about the current work force. Viewing such shows finds an echo in many people's attitudes toward public culture. When

cynicism becomes the norm, irony becomes a survival tactic. Yet the myth of the "free" individual choosing a "personal" retirement investment account, or using the marketplace to find satisfactory health insurance or a charter school for the kids, parallels the notion of salvation through a "personal" (yet necessarily public) declaration of Jesus as savior. The rhetoric of these moments hides the market as a place where power is exercised. Gibson's *Passion* and its phenomenal success is a symptom of the current moment. Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* in its best moments points to a genuinely radical (to the root) response.

Remembering Bill Van Wert

by Chuck Kleinhans for the editors

Bill Van Wert was one of a group of film people in and around the Comparative Literature program at Indiana University in the early 70s. After some of us moved on and decided to begin *Jump Cut*, Bill joined our first big organizational meeting in December 73. He participated enthusiastically in our first years contributing articles such as his comparison of detective films, "[Phillip Marlowe: hardboiled to softboiled to poached](#)" (JC 3). Although his family priorities and passion for creative writing and teaching creative writing directed his almost boundless energies elsewhere, Bill remained an enthusiastic supporter. We all felt a great loss when we learned of his sudden illness and death.

Bill was always comic and creative, with a knowledge and passion for genre films and surrealism in equal measure. He loved films and talking about films. He became a graduate school legend when he sat down and wrote and typed out what was the first and last draft of his dissertation in two and a half weeks of a sweltering Bloomington Indiana summer, sustained by a room fan and gallons of ice tea. Bill took a teaching job at Temple University, where he stayed, started a family, and emerged from a marriage meltdown as the single dad of three young boys. Being a single dad changed his priorities.

Visiting him several times in the early 80s, I marveled at the amazing organization of the family to get the youngest to daycare and the other boys to school, and Dad to the university. Bill's optimism and humor in the face of a hectic life made manifest the love at the base of the family. After the boys went to bed, Bill would talk and tell stories, then stay up while his guests slept and continue his passion for writing stories and novels. His fiction usually dealt with family with humor and intensity and often won awards and were a tribute to his inventiveness. He was equally passionate about teaching.

Bill's life as a single dad gave him a practical network of single moms who were working with the same set of daily problems to be solved and this in turn gave him insight into families and their dynamics that many family men never develop. We miss his warmth and compassion intensely.

Links

Abu Ghraib and images of abuse and torture

by Julia Lesage

When I first saw the photos from Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, showing U.S. military abusing detainees, I was both shocked by them and found them strangely familiar, like travel pictures, trophy photos, and commercial pornography reenacted. It is important to consider these images as social phenomena and as cultural artifacts. In doing research for an essay on these images and their re-interpretation in television prime time fiction, I have searched the web extensively. This search revealed a number of unfamiliar connections to me, and also a large number of progressive Internet sites that are worth bookmarking and visiting regularly. Below are selected links and my annotations of some of the connections. In general, I have tried to list places where the entire article can be read or downloaded without charge. When the link downloads a PDF file to your computer, I have noted that.

The photos themselves came public in a short period of time. Although thousands of them reputedly exist, they seem to have largely disappeared from the news or even from public distribution on the Internet. The U.S. Congress saw much of this material. For those who have not seen the photos, these are the sites where they are displayed:

- [20 images](#) and their publication history [can enlarge images]
- [antiwar.com](#)
- the [images and readers comments](#)
- pictures [within an article](#)
- PDF download [for printing](#)

A little observed aspect of Internet censorship is that Google "Image" search does not carry or search for images of the Abu Ghraib prison abuse nor of the soldiers accused of committing the abuses. You can try this search right now in Google Images for "Abu Ghraib." The problem was [first noted in blogs](#), but is ironically commented on by Google's citing many of these blogs on the first page that comes up if you do a text search on the words, "Abu Ghraib photos." (If you click, "I'm

feeling lucky,” Google takes you directly to the antwar.com site noted above.) Blogs [still follow this controversy](#) heatedly.

Overviews of the abuses at Abu Ghraib are located in a number of online information sites and "encyclopedias," including

- [Wikipedia](#), which also has a useful entry on the "Copper Green" black ops program
- [Brainyencyclopedia](#)
- [OpenDemocracy](#): The Meanings of Abu Ghraib (bookmark site to visit often)
- Abu Ghraib [timeline, especially about media response](#)

The attention of the world was drawn to the photos and to the abuses in the prison by the essays of Seymour Hersh. These appeared first in the *New Yorker*, and most are online. They are also available, with other essays, in Hersh's book, [Chain of Command](#). In a keynote speech to the ACLU convention, July 2004, Hersh says he has seen video of boys being raped at Abu Ghraib, in front of their imprisoned mothers: "And I can tell you it was much worse, and the government knows it's much worse, than they've even told you. There are worse photos, worse videotapes, worse events. To *The New Yorker's* credit we decided, not for censorship, but just how much can you, how much can you levy on Arab manhood, in public?"

- ["The Gray Zone,"](#) Hersh
- ["Chain of Command,"](#) Hersh
- ["Torture at Abu Ghraib,"](#) Hersh
- Hersh's ACLU speech--children raped at Abu Ghraib—found at [boingboing.net](#) and [pastpeak.com](#)
- Hersh interviews: [Berkeley](#), [DemocracyNow](#), [San Francisco Chronicle](#).
- [Hersh on NPR](#)

Other useful overview material can be found in the following discussions:

- [Rolling Stone on the secret files](#)
- [The Politics of Torture](#), eds. Mark Danner, Barbara Erenreich, et al
- [timeline of the Abu Ghaib story](#)
- abuse in military, [Denver Post series](#)

Major public documents are available, sometimes as PDF files, sometimes in summary form:

- Various [army reports](#)
- [White House Counsel Gonzales' memo](#) on prisoner treatment
- [Amnesty International's Report on Torture](#), PDF, 202 pages
- Amnesty International: [USA: Human Dignity Denied, Torture and Accountability in the 'War on Terror'](#)
- [Report on and posting of all the "supplementary documents"](#) that

formed the basis for the Taguba report, from the Center for Public Integrity

- [ACLU archive of all “supplementary documents”](#) released through Freedom of Information Act
- Amnesty [letter to Bush](#)
- [International Red Cross Report](#)
- U.S. [Government reply](#) to Human Rights Watch
- Taguba report [excerpts](#)
- Taguba report [text](#)
- Taguba report and supplementary documents, [related links](#)

Author Mark Danner analyzes much of this material:

- [Danner web site](#) — contains the full text of many of his essays
- Danner’s review of Schlesinger Independent Panel report: [Part One](#) and [Part Two](#)
- [review of Danner’s book](#) on Abu Ghraib: *Torture and Truth*

A number of Internet sites are primarily links sites, and offer a wide range of links to reportage, analysis, and documents:

- [comprehensive links, by date](#)
- ["highbeam.com" search engine](#) links. This is a commercial site that will charge for downloading articles, but the links page is useful to add to your bibliography. Many of the articles can be searched for separately, and will be free. Similarly, the search engine [findarticles.com](#) is tied to highbeam.com, but can usefully be searched for *free* articles.
- [annotated](#) links
- links to [various governmental reports](#)
- Center for Media and Democracy’s extensive "[disinfopedia](#)" links
- [camera/Iraq](#): the war of images in the middle east
- [watch: covering the war on terror](#). Search for “Abu Ghraib.” Many links, also blog commentary.

Of particular interest to me are the many essays that the photos from Abu Ghraib which consider the political implications of photography itself, especially violent imagery. The context for interpreting the Abu Ghraib photos has been their use of the conventions of commercial pornography, the travel photo, the trophy image, the digital phone and camera, and the sending of pictures over the Internet. At the same time, for those interested in photography, two major documents also shape interpretation of these images: Susan Sontag’s 2003 book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, and the 2004 publication of *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, by James Allen, Hilton Als, Congressman John Lewis, and Leon F. Litwak. Sontag has been influenced by her many trips to Kosovo, and during the Abu Ghraib revelations, she wrote a follow-up essay specifically about the Abu Ghraib photos, “[Regarding the Torture of Others](#).” I include links below to discussions of the Sontag book since the material has a direct bearing on how these photos bring up many political issues both about their regressive nature and their potential benefit in creating a demand

for social change. *Without Sanctuary* existed first as a web site, and more recently as a traveling photo exhibition. This exhibition has elicited reviews that discuss the role of violent imagery at the time of the lynchings and today in our historical consciousness. Furthermore, the Abu Ghraib photos have been used in contemporary art works and museum exhibits, which also raise issues about spectatorship and becoming sensitized or desensitized to the sufferings of others.

Without Sanctuary related links include:

- [dealing with shocking images, links](#) for a course on this subject
- *Without Sanctuary* [photo exhibit in Atlanta](#)
- [politics of lynching](#)
- [problems of lynching photos in museums](#)
- [lamenting the disappearance of the dead](#)
- “[Dungeons and Demons](#)” by Salim Muwakkil
- “[Abu Ghraib: Is this America?](#)”
- lynching exhibit [blog and comments](#)
- “[Lynching’s legacy lives](#)”
- “[Lynching and torture, then and now](#)”
- “[Lynching in America](#)”
- [history of lynching, links](#)
- [more on history of lynching](#)
- The [past in the present](#): the role of slavery in formation of African American identity,” PDF

Links related to *Regarding the Pain of Others* include:

- multipart commentary on *Regarding the Pain of Others* and [illustration of book’s image references at “artrift” site](#)
- [informative blog on this long presentation at “artrift”](#)
- *Guardian* UK [review of Sontag](#) book
- [review from Australia, need to think against the grain](#)
- [Kellner and Sontag](#) and social implications of art
- [Sontag and violent images](#)
- [wnbc review by John Leonard: she is a witness to Kosovo](#)
- [problems of glamorizing violence](#)
- review by [photographer Robert Hirsch](#)
- dialogue on Sontag in *Slate*, [Luc Sante and Jim Lewis](#)
- critique in *Village Voice*, on [radical willfulness and repulsive attractions](#)
- a “[morally platitudinous](#) essay”
- [relation to porn and Abu Ghraib](#)
- [review by Norman Solomon](#)
- [other eye of the beholder](#)
- [art of darkness](#)
- [Bill Moyers interview](#) with Sontag
- Sontag [interview](#) with filmmaker Evans Chan
- [blog and Sontag’s *Guardian* essay](#), “What Have We Done?”
- [Christopher Hitchens review](#)
- [John Berger on the violent images of Francis Bacon](#)

The photos circulated publicly from Abu Ghraib elicited a number of significant essays on contemporary image culture and its political implications:

- “Tourists and Torturers” Luc Sante, *New York Times*, and complete text of other [articles used in class on “Covering the War on Terror”](#) — useful and extensive set of essays, reportage, and links
- [Hazel Carby on the spectacle of torture](#)
- [Caravaggio in Iraq](#)
- [death images and race](#)
- [how cultural context shifts meaning](#)
- [snapshots in war](#)
- [trophy shots](#)
- [aestheticization of torture](#)
- [photos as blinkers](#)
- [should we show horror in the news](#)
- [abuse of images](#)
- [publishing pictures of abuse](#)
- *Guardian’s* [decision to print images, by editor](#)
- [searing images, a newspaper editorial](#)
- [“Should we have looked away?” \(about Beslan images\)](#)
- [What should be shown?](#) From “Camera/Iraq: the war of images in the Middle East” website
- [camera’s violence as our uncanny self](#)
- [haunting images](#)
- [war photography as hell](#)
- [images and war, blog](#)
- [“Atrocity, memory, photography”](#) on Bosnia.
- [Evans Chan, filmmaker, on war and images](#)
- [Henry Giroux on photo education now, PDF essay](#)
- [“Ceremonies of nostalgia”](#)
- *Bad Subjects: a political journal of everyday life* has a special issue of its e-journal on U.S. war culture. All the articles in this issue offer important takes on the war and media, especially [“Making Starship Troopers,”](#) [“The Reality Video Game of War,”](#) [“The War Show,”](#) [“U.S. Media Representations of Sacrifice in the Iraq War,”](#) [“War! Blog!,”](#) [“Affective Tactics.”](#)
- [“Postcards from the edge”](#)
- [“Rhetoric and/as terrorism,”](#) on verbal reductiveness and connotation
- [“Biting on the bullet”](#) by John Law, PDF
- this [digital war](#)
- [website of Douglas Kellner](#), with many relevant essays
- [Martha Rosler on digital manipulations](#)
- [Ariel Dorfman on photographic representation of the disappeared](#)
- [Abu Ghraib and reality TV](#)
- analysis of [media and bombings in Bali](#), PDF
- [“Imagining famine,”](#) exhibit by photographer D.J. Clark. See also his essay, PDF format, [“Production of a contemporary famine image.”](#)

Some writers draw a specific link between the Abu Ghraib photos and pornography:

- [Limbaugh](#) says the troops were just “blowing off steam”
- [Rush Limbaugh discussed](#)
- [Frank Rich](#) on porn and the Abu Ghraib photos from *New York Times*
- from *Chronicle of Higher Education*, [Susan J. Brison](#), torture or porn?

Art using the images or commenting on them, and critical responses to this kind of art, especially in museums, which elicit a spectatorial gaze:

- “[Art after Abu Ghraib](#),” good links
- [destructive power of abuse images](#)
- [artists' blog](#)
- [controversy at Pittsburgh's Warhol gallery](#)
- [San Francisco print shop refuses to make an exhibit print](#)
- [Washington DC "Inconvenient Evidence" exhibit](#)
- [Abu Ghraib street posters in NYC](#)
- [Abu Ghraib coloring book and desensitization](#)
- [Documenta 11](#). Large exhibit on role of art in this postcolonial, globally interconnected world

Reportage on Abu Ghraib often includes witness testimony, especially from released prisoners, some of whom are speaking out from England. In addition, the UK newspaper, the *Guardian*, keeps a [large web archive of Iraq news stories and analysis](#); it can be searched for specific topics and persons as well. In the United States, a particularly [effective and long-running series of articles comes from Leon Worden](#), editor of the Santa Clara *Signal*. Some stories from other sources are noted below; the home pages of these sources may also be useful to “bookmark.”

- [Roger Brokaw, an interrogator, interviewed](#)
- [CACI corporation and civilian contractor involvement](#)
- [two CACI at Abu Ghraib](#)
- [five interrogation deaths](#)
- [about Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez](#)
- [the military leaks photos](#)
- [“Secret world of U.S. jails”](#)
- [new rules for torture](#)
- [sworn statements by detainees](#)
- [legal aspects](#)
- [ongoing media silences](#)
- [60 Minutes](#) on the photos
- [bogus rape photos](#)
- U.S [administration's comments](#) — a timeline

The extensive analyses of the political, historical, and psychological and moral aspects of U.S. intelligence gathering policy at Abu Ghraib have

led to a consideration of the brutality underpinning colonialism and contemporary manifestations of imperialism. That brutality can also be seen in U.S. prisons. The photos and subsequent discussions of abusive treatment, turning the abused into the “subhuman,” has also provoked critics to look back at history, especially the history of torture, to understand this new version of aggressive force. Many of the essays below are models of political commentary as they delve into the structural foundations of a contemporary phenomenon. Finally, image analysis and political analysis, as well as recognizing the existential condition of oppression and suffering, cannot be separated out when looking at and thinking about the photos from Abu Ghraib.

Political analysis: imperialism, alternate views

- [Muslim response to photos](#)
- [Arab view of U.S. hypocrisy](#)
- [Arab perspective on U.S. sexual perversion](#)
- [Arab view of sexual humiliation](#)
- [U.S. and Arab media](#)
- [African American empathy with tortured Iraqis](#)
- [“The Color of Abu Ghraib”](#)
- [Muslim democracy and Abu Ghraib](#)
- “Marines vs. Fedayeen: [interpretive naming and constructing the other](#)”
- [torture and imperial racism](#)
- [empire's mockery](#)
- atrocity, U.S. record, ["dirty hands" principle](#)
- [abuse of cultural anthropology](#)
- [geographies of violence and power](#), course outline
- world [history course on violence](#), outline for introductory course
- [Social Research](#), special issue, winter 02. This contains many important essays.
- [Israeli torture of Palestinians](#)
- [MERIP column on the Abu Ghraib images](#). MERIP is a long-standing, progressive academic journal on the Middle East.
- ["Torture and the Future"](#) by Lisa Hajjar (from MERIP)

Political analysis: U.S. institutions and culture

- [U.S. moral myth](#)
- [democracy as gift of the west](#)
- Iraq torture and [institutionalized brutality](#)
- [relation to Presidency](#)
- [redefining the terrorist](#)
- [“She held the leash”](#), *Village Voice*
- [Abu Ghraib rape and sodomy](#), *Rolling Stone*
- Slavoj Zizek on the [“obscene enjoyment](#) that underlies the American way of life.” [Readers' comments](#).
- [new warrior class](#)
- [“Terror experts,”](#) James Petras
- [from Nuremberg to Guantanamo](#)

- willing torturers
- [torture and invisibility](#)
- [moral extraterritoriality](#)
- torture [kept out of sight](#), articles
- [torture and the U.S. character](#)
- [torture as normalcy](#)
- [torture, the CIA, and the press](#)
- ["stress and duress"](#)
- [MD on torture](#)
- ["The culture of torture"](#) by Zizek
- [legal issues traced](#)
- [international justice](#)
- [intelligence gathering vs military code](#)
- ["Breaking Silence," Christian perspective](#)
- [needed changes in Army](#)
- concrete [recommendations from Center for American Progress](#)

History

- [Human Rights Watch report](#)
- [Latin American parallels](#)
- [America's road to Abu Ghraib](#), *Mother Jones*
- [atrocity history](#), *Village Voice*
- ["Before Abu Ghraib"](#) by Peter Kornbluh
- [School of the Americas Watch, SOAW](#)
- [U.N. 1992 Abu Ghraib inspector](#)

Guantanamo

- [Guantanamo's videotaping](#) by David Rose. Rose is author of the book, [Guantamao: The War on Human Rights](#)
- Guantanamo [detainee accounts](#): report from Human Rights Watch
- [Camp x-ray](#) at Guantanamo, from Wikipedia
- Guantanamo prisoners, [overview and links](#)
- Detainees released in England tell their story:
 - [Five detainees released in UK](#)
 - [Tarek Dergoul's accusations](#)
 - [David Rose interviews Tergoul](#)
 - [UK officials knew of abuse](#)
 - [Released detainees furious at U.S. propaganda](#)
 - UK detainees' [115 page report](#), submitted to U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, PDF and summary, Center for Constitutional Rights: The report discusses sexual humiliation of the prisoners, their being forcibly injected with unidentified drugs, being bitten by scorpions and snakes allowed to roam the cells, prisoner abuse by the guards in a planned and sophisticated manner, religious humiliation in a "clear effort to get prisoners to abandon their faith," and prisoners' confessing to things they did not and could not have done.

Abu Ghraib and U.S. prisons

- [“A prison near you,”](#) Norm Solomon
- [Abu Ghraib, USA](#)
- [prison rape](#)
- [unlearned prison lessons](#)
- [historical perspective](#) on prison brutality

Moral and psychological analysis

- how [Christian organizations and publications did or did not respond](#) to photos
- [tolerating the intolerable](#)
- [banality of evil](#)
- analysis of [U.S. concept of a "just war"](#)
- avoid [“othering”](#)
- [psychodynamics of occupation](#)
- [ruling class psychology](#)
- [triumphalism and abasement](#)
- [dehumanization and self](#)
- special issue of the Scholar and Feminist Online: *Public Sentiments*, on [“Trauma, Global, National, and Everyday”](#): here, an extensive print bibliography

Torture

- Darius Rejali
 - [three approaches to torture](#)
 - [on Darius Rejali's work](#)
 - torture history, [interview with Darius Rejali](#)
 - torture's [dark allure](#)
 - [Arab memories of colonial and ancient humiliations](#)
 - [electric torture](#) history
 - [forced standing](#)
 - Abu Ghraib methods [similar to imperialists, Gestapo](#)
- Robert Jay Lifton, MD
 - on torture in Iraq, [New England Journal of Medicine](#)
 - Robert Jay Lifton book: [The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and Genocide](#)
 - [conversation with Lifton](#)
 - [Lifton and Bill Moyers on Iraq](#)
 - Lifton, [“American apocalypse”](#)
 - [Lifton, “Conditions of atrocity”](#)
- [doctors and Iraq torture](#)
- [medicalization](#) of torture
- torture as [part of war](#)
- [torture history](#)
- [cruel, inhuman, and degrading](#)
- [privatization](#) of torture